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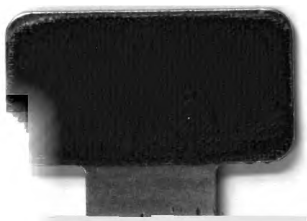
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ON
THE CONVENTUAL LIFE:
THREE LECTURES.

BY
THE RIGHT REV. BISHOP ULLATHORNE.

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PREFACE.

THE following Lectures were delivered to a mixed audience of Catholics and Protestants in St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham. They were suggested by the agitation raised against Convents in the Midland Counties in the course of last year; and more especially by the great excitement occasioned in Birmingham, and that for a continuance of several months, through a slanderous story brought forth in a Lecture delivered in the Town Hall by a Member of the Medical Faculty. The story itself was proved by a Committee of Magistrates to have been the mere invention of a poor girl, who had never, to her knowledge, spoken to a Catholic in her life. But the author was led by these events to reflect upon the vast amount of ignorance and misconception which prevails amongst our countrymen respecting Conventual life, and on the facilities which that ignorance lends to every cunning and designing firebrand who chooses to set the popular feelings in a

flame by playing on these vulgar prejudices. He therefore resolved to put forth the truth both in its facts and principles respecting the origin, the spirit, and the work of Convents, and to give that truth a wider circulation by committing these Lectures to the press. In so doing, the author trusts that he has furnished a solution of such prejudices as are the result of ignorance and misinformation ; those which are loved and held to for their own sake are beyond mere human remedies.

LECTURE FIRST.

THE ORIGIN OF CONVENTUAL LIFE.

MY BRETHREN,—Amongst the subjects that have recently engaged the minds of English readers, Mr. Hepworth Dixon's descriptions of certain half religious half social sects sprung up in America have attracted no small attention. Startling as the accounts of some of these societies are, when contrasted with the general views entertained of what Christian modesty and propriety demand; to those who are acquainted with the long chain of heresies that through so many ages have afflicted the world, there is nothing in them that is practically new. Their moral, if not their doctrinal theories, bear a family likeness to certain branches of the Gnostics, who troubled the early Church; to the Manicheans, who misled the early manhood of St. Augustin; to the Paulicians and Priscillianists, who infected parts of Asia and Spain in the fifth century; to the Albigenses, who spread their foul practices over southern France in the thirteenth century; and to the numerous branches sprung from these sects and bearing many other names. They all professed alike to be the special children of the Bible; they all claimed a greater purity of soul than the Christians of the Catholic Church; they all took the special name of *purists*; and they all professed to achieve the highest attainable purity of soul, on some theory that justified the most unbecoming excesses in practice.

But whilst our countrymen have been contemplating these American sects with wondering eyes, as something remote, strange and portentous; they have failed as yet to realize the significance of a society that is working at our own doors,—a society which, the more contemptible we allow it in itself to be, the more significant is the fact of the amount of agitation which it causes, the extent of violence which it arouses and puts even into actual use with impunity, and the mass of impurity which is the chief weapon of its warfare. Devoid of any positive principle, yet clothing itself with the Protestant name, professing also to unite a political with a religious object, this Protestant Electoral Union has already its ministers, its tabernacles, an organization, and a literature. Placed on the lowest imaginable lever of comprehensiveness, it takes into its organization or accepts as its auxiliaries all who have been taught to hold the Catholic name in horror, or who, from whatever cause, have a disbelief in the grace and the virtue of purity.

Though blank of principles of its own, this society has yet a creed which it inculcates, a belief which it propagates, a conviction which it labours to establish; but this creed is neither a system of theology nor a code of morals, but a budget of slanderous charges against the spiritual guides of the greatest Christian community that the world has ever seen. Unconsciously, may we hope, yet veritably, it is a copy as to its methods, of that society of pagan zealots and disorderly men, who, stimulated by the ministers of many temples and many gods, met the rising Christian Church with charges of its being an impure sect, devoted to foul deeds in secret, and hostile to the national institutions. Their success in arousing hatred

and persecution of the innocent Christians among their pagan neighbours was chiefly attained by their collections of disgraceful stories, specimens of which have been left us by the Christian Apologists, that we could no more repeat here, than we could read the productions of this new society.

That the divine sacraments, the Christian graces and the holy vows of religion, whose object it is to raise mankind to an exalted purity of life, are systematically perverted to the most unhallowed purposes; that every priest is a profligate, every nun an immoral person, and every Catholic female who goes to confession a woman of corrupted heart; that all of them are thus immorally tainted, though the assertion always fails of proof as to any individual person or any particular instance;—such are the chief articles in the creed preached by these revivalists of the old antichristian slander. Proofs were what the pagan adversaries of the Christians did not require, the general charge was all-sufficing,—they did not charge them with being personally criminals, but with being Christians. They did not bring it home to this priest or to that deacon, to this nun or to that deaconess, that they were wicked in their ways; but they were certain, and held it like a faith, that the whole body was wicked. Every teaching that affects to have religion for its object must have its invisible and unproveable mysteries; and in the propagation of belief in the unseen vices of the Catholic Church of Christ, facts are of little importance, provided there are plenty of good stories. They are easily understood; they tickle the vulgar appetite, to which they are always acceptable, are easily repeated, and never can be refuted. Like snowballs, the longer you roll them,

the bigger they grow. Like birds, if you hunt them into a corner, they escape over your head to perch in more inaccessible places. Catch your bird, and you are no better off; for like that old Proteus, who must have been the personification of a slanderous story, it will change its shape and slip through your fingers. But let that story come in the name of Christian zeal; let it be sharply pointed as a weapon of spiritual warfare; let it have a zest of scandal in it; let it justify the godly of either sex in having a fair look at the forbidden apples; let it enable them to thank God, and to glory before men, that they of this or that little sect are not as the priests and nuns of that great, historical Catholic Church about which so much is heard in the world, and who can doubt but that such a story, with many the like fables, will find a ready welcome, and a prompt diffusion, from a far from inconsiderable portion of what is called the religious world.

But this system of aggressive violence has another force at its command, on which it shrewdly calculates. All coarse natures, all graceless dispositions, all appetites for gross sensationalism, and all lovers of mischief for mischief's sake, may be safely calculated upon as co-operators or as sympathizers in a war waged against a religious body with the weapons of impure accusation. The licentious and the dissolute can accept a religious movement, and make themselves a part of it, where the only work to be accomplished is to lay their own vices on the innocent. Sensationalism, it must be owned, is the passion of the day; a passion which is undoubtedly due to the vast increase of sensual indulgence, and the opportunities afforded for ever-varied excitement, both mental and physical. But to an appetite of this sort,

ever hungering for new food and entertainment, what are all the sensational novels or adventures ever written, compared with good concrete stories, told in the interests of society and religion, yet very irreligious stories, which you can fasten on the very ministers of religion you see walking in the streets, or fix upon establishments which you can point to as you pass, and which are invested in your mind with a sense as of an impenetrable mystery? There is an undeniable fascination about such things, and the one thing unpardonable in them would be, that they should prove not to be true. And yet the fact is undeniable, that nuns are not more secluded living in their convent, than a family living in their house. They receive a great many more visitors, from a much greater variety of classes, than any private family; and whilst a private family has but one or two reception-rooms for their guests, Protestants as well as Catholics are continually going over the whole of our conventual establishments. Mystery in these convents, as greater than the mystery of any family residence, is chiefly a work of the imagination.

One property of convent stories is their wonderful vitality. Let them die in one place of sheer disproof, and, reminding one of the old doctrine of the migration of souls into new bodies, they rise the self-same, new clothed and in renovated life, on some distant scene, Maria Monk, whose incredible story was put down in its birth-place through the investigation of a committee of Protestant gentlemen thirty and one years ago, still lives in lusty life in England, and the "nunnery story," which came to its death three weeks ago in Birmingham from a similar cause, is now doing duty through the infidel newspapers of

France against the convents and the Catholic Church in that country.

Let me give you an example or two of how these stories come into existence and go on their travels. I select what I can narrate without impropriety. Some two and twenty years ago a stage-coach drove twice a day past the walls of a convent in the west of England, and the coachman used to point with his whip to a broken branch that hung from a tree over the garden wall. As he pointed it out for the entertainment of his passengers, he used to say, "That is the branch by which the nun escaped over the wall." No one knew anything about the nun, but there was the branch, and who could disbelieve his own eyes? I, indeed, knew that a gale of wind had broken the branch, and any one who had chosen to examine would have seen that no nun's weight could have accomplished the feat; and, moreover, there was a gate in the wall on the latch all day for the workmen in the grounds to pass through, which would have saved any nun the exertion and exposure of clambering over a nine feet wall. Yet it became an article of faith in all that country side that a nun had escaped over the wall by the help of a tree, and, like the bird, the story travelled far and wide, and in various parts of the country it attached itself to other trees, to other walls, and to the nuns of other convents.

Let me next give you an example of a story ending where it began, unless it has begun anew. For the year 1867 will be remembered in the annals of the midland counties for its extinct furnaces and its convent stories. They begun in South Staffordshire, perched like obscene birds upon first one convent then another, went from the Potteries to Wolverhampton, and so by a

round in the black country came at last to Birmingham. But the most curious thing was that all these stories fitted every convent, just as loose cloaks fit all shoulders alike. About the middle of last year a respectable Catholic tradesman, of Birmingham, whilst on a journey, was told by another Birmingham man of business of a most scandalous case occurring in a Birmingham convent, he even received the address of the person, also of Birmingham, from whom his information came. No sooner, however, did my Catholic friend return home than he called upon this person, who assured him that he knew nothing about the matter, and had never said anything of the kind. Surprised at this, the Catholic wrote to his informant, who wrote in reply that such a statement had never passed his lips.

One case more, and then I will end this long, yet unavoidable preface. There is a convent in Staffordshire, having several charitable institutions attached to it, and amongst these a hospital of incurable patients. About three months ago the inmates of the hospital, as well as the community, were much distressed on account of the grave illness of the Mother Superioress, one who was a true mother to them all, and greatly beloved as such. A poor girl amongst the hospital patients who was subject to fits, and at such times to fancies also, got a notion in the night that she ought to go and see her whom she called her mother. But the superioress was in the convent, situated some two hundred yards from the hospital, though in the same enclosure. Accordingly she rose and went out, the door being merely on the latch, but when she found herself in the dark yard, the poor weak girl screamed out with affright. This alarmed the nursing sisters, who went after

her, soothed her, and brought her in to her bed. But in the street there was a policeman on his beat, and he at once jumped to his own conclusions, and spread a story in the town which brought about the ready belief that a nun was attempting to escape and had been seized in the act. The Protestant doctor of the hospital examined into the case, as did the police inspector, but the Anglican rector also became busy in the affair. He was invited with all politeness by the convent to come and examine for himself. This he declined, but finally declared himself satisfied. Yet as an itinerant firebrand had fitted his pack of stories on that very convent some time before, I have no doubt but that there are still a number of fanatics who believe that it was a veritable case of a nun escaping. And yet all the world thereabouts know that one side of the enclosure is but a common hedge on the garden side, that both at the hospital and at the convent there are doors on the latch all day, and that the members of the community are continually walking out, both in the town and about the country, and that they attend three schools outside the convent.

To us Catholics nothing can be more ludicrous and at the same time more pitiable than the exhibition which so many of our countrymen and countrywomen make of their minds whenever they have occasion to refer to these Religious ladies. It would almost seem as if they derived their notions of the most free hearted and contented of women from troubled dreams and from nightmares, or from spectres conjured up to the imagination in moments of nervousness or midnight fears;—so wide of the mark, in such grotesque contravention to the facts, so incapable of fitting into the frame of things out of which they profess to

come, are the fantastic images and the mournful figures that fill their heads. It is not the ignorance of what nuns and convents are that surprises us, for that is a matter of course; but it is the assumption of knowledge respecting them, and the confidence with which that knowledge is insisted upon. They remind one of the German who was called upon to write the natural history of the camel. He had never seen a camel, as they have never seen a nun to speak to, but he went into his study, took to his pipe, and drew out what he considered to be very accurate descriptions of the camel from the internal phenomena of his own consciousness.

But you will agree with me that if the subject is worth being talked about it is worth understanding, and to understand it requires a fair investigation of the following questions:—What are nuns? How came there to be nuns? Is there any warrant for them in the Scriptures? Are they a part of primitive Christianity? Have they always existed in the Church of Christ? If they prove to be part and parcel of the Christian religion no abuses that you can fancy or allege can abrogate them, more than they can abrogate ecclesiastical orders or marriage, both of which have been the subject of grievous abuses. And, moreover, if the institution itself be Divine in its origin and institution, it supposes some inherent grace that is of vital force to preserve its votaries from abusing their state of life. Let us then examine these questions, as far at least as the remaining space of this lecture will allow of.

A nun is a virgin or a widow, who, from the motive of religion, vows to live a life of chastity for God's sake, to renounce the world by a life of voluntary and practical poverty, and to live in

obedience to a definite rule. I include widows in the definition, although they form a small minority. The vows, as I have already intimated, are those of chastity, poverty, and obedience, but the two last of these vows are defined as to their practical extent by the rule. The state of a nun resembles that of clergymen and of married persons in this respect, that it rests upon vows, and upon vows taken for life, but it differs from the engagement of married persons in this respect, amongst others, that there is a long probation of the state of life before any engagement is taken. Nuns are called *Religious women*, or simply *Religious*, because not only their lives, but their very persons, are consecrated to God. In the primitive church they were called *ascetics*, and *ecclesiastical* or *canonical* virgins, as being enrolled in the *canon* or register of the church to which they belonged. They were also called Christ's virgins, and in our old Saxon laws they received the name of God's brides. From the earliest times a violation of their vow of chastity was accounted amongst the most sacrilegious crimes. As Tertullian says, at the end of the second century, such a crime would be "an adultery, not as against a husband, but as against Christ."

So different was the position in which Christianity found woman from that in which it has placed her, that it is difficult for us to realize the part which women were called upon to act as co-operators, in establishing the faith of Christ amongst their own sex. But as men were set apart by ordination for the founding of the Church, so also were certain women set apart, and though not by ordination, yet by a special consecration, were devoted to take their subordinate share in the Divine work of sanctifying the world. Of

these, some were widows having had but one husband, and others had never been married, but all were bound to a life of chastity. These were the deaconesses of the churches. But besides these, there were also a much larger class of consecrated virgins who lived an ascetic and retired life. I shall speak of each of these classes of Religious women in turn. That a Virgin Mother should have been pre-ordained from eternity to bring our Lord and Saviour into the world, to nurse His childhood, and be the companion of His mortal life, is a fact of most profound significance. That our Blessed Lord should have led a life on earth of chastity, abnegation, and obedience is of still vaster significance, if any one will weigh it well. Here we have the two models of perfect life, one in each sex, the one Divine, the other as near Divine as it is possible to imagine in a mere creature. And this perfection of life, far above what the Commandments prescribe to common mortals, springs not of human nature, but of eternal grace. Then there is John the Baptist, the herald of Christ's path, the "burning and shining light," who is also a virgin and an ascetic; and, again, John the Evangelist, the Eagle of the Gospel, the best beloved, who is also a virgin, and to whose care Jesus commits Mary at His crucifixion. Does this group, with Jesus for its centre, indicate that there is a special holiness and perfection of soul in a virginal life consecrated to God, or does it not? This question should not be looked at askance, but fairly in the face, and then be fairly answered. Whatever some who glory in the Christian name may think, the pagans would have answered in the affirmative.

The Celtic and Scandinavian races had their virgin prophetesses, the most sacred of their sex. The Greeks had their virgin priestesses of Apollo, whose inspirations guided them whenever a great emergency arose, both in their public and their private affairs. The Romans had their vestal virgins contemporary with their city, who kept alive the sacred flame that was symbolical of its life. Looked upon as amongst the most sacred of religious institutions, it is hard for modern matter of fact Englishmen to realise the dignity with which these virgins were invested, or the veneration with which they were surrounded. They had also their sybils, secluded virgin prophetesses, who had predicted that from a virgin a new order of things should spring up in the world,—a prophecy which the poet Virgil popularised, and so prepared the Roman mind for Christianity. Amongst the cultivated races of the far East again, this mode of life was considered to be eminently holy, and the Buddhists, who prevailed from six hundred years before Christ, and still form a third of the world's population, covered China and India with monasteries of celibates. Pythagoras, again, had familiarised both Greeks and Romans with a system of purifying the soul, based upon community of life, goods in common, and the discipline of abstinence and silence. The Jews, again, had their monastic system in the communities of Essenes described by Josephus, and in the Therapeuts of Egypt, described by Philo. In short, the whole cultivated world before Christianity combines its testimony in regarding the consecration of virginity as a religious act to be one of the most sacred and religious of rites. And where Protestantism takes

the contrary view, it but revives a heresy, of limited extent, that arose in the fifth century, and was put down by the pen of St. Jerome.

Around the Virginal Mother of Christ, we find a group of devoted women, who follow our Lord and his Apostles, throughout their ministry. They stood steadfast to him at His crucifixion, and became conspicuous after His Resurrection; and they received the Holy Spirit with the disciples on the day of Pentecost. If you call to mind what was then the domestic life and social position of woman; if you represent to yourself the subjection and seclusion to which even the mothers and daughters of the Greeks and Romans were committed; you will readily understand that the Gospel could only have penetrated into their domestic circles through the agency of their own sex. For men, and especially strangers, to hold much converse with the female departments of pagan residences was not to be thought of. Hence the devout women who followed our Lord became the type of a class of women wholly consecrated to his service and that of His Church. These were the deaconesses whom St. Paul calls sisters, and also widows, not that all were widows in the common acceptation; but that they wore the widow's raiments and lived apart from the world. St. Paul lets us know that they travelled with the Apostles, and that, though unmarried, he had the right to have them as assistants on his travels, yet he appears to have had them only as resident co-operators in the churches which he founded. In his first epistle to the Bishop St. Timothy, after describing the qualities to be looked for in those who are to be chosen for Bishops and for Deacons, the Apostle gives a canon of the qualities to be sought for in those

who are to be "chosen" for the office of widows or deaconesses. Like the bishops, they must not have been married more than once, must be persons already tried, of mature age, sober and modest, practised in continual prayer, and exercised in all works of kindness and charity. But he especially objects to young widows for this office, "For when they have grown wanton in Christ they will marry, having damnation, because they have made void their first faith." He would have such to marry rather than enter the sisterhood. This passage plainly indicates that the deaconesses were bound in Christ by an obligation of chastity, and that to violate their fidelity by marriage was a grievous crime.

To the Romans the great Apostle recommends the deaconess Phœbe as "our sister, who is in the ministry of the Church at Chenchrea." As he salutes Prisca and Aquila as "my helpers in the Lord," to whom not only he gives thanks, but "all the churches of the Gentiles," so he salutes the deaconess Mary, "who has laboured much among you." Greeting the chief deaconess as well as the chief clergy, he always alluded to the laboriousness of their work. They were the sisters of charity of the primitive Church, and they were something more. For although women could receive no ecclesiastical orders, their position and work with their own sex, and the rite by which they were constituted, were not unlike what belonged to an ecclesiastical order. The Apostolic Constitutions, which are a code of church laws accumulated in the first three centuries, gives a number of regulations about their office, discipline and works. Some of the earliest Fathers wrote about them. The early Councils pass decrees concerning them. Like the clergy, they were

matriculated on the rolls of their churches, and, when unprovided for, were maintained out of the church's revenues. Like the nuns of modern times, they were under the immediate jurisdiction of the bishop, and not of the clergy, and to the bishop only were they responsible. One of the most ancient Rituals gives the form of their profession, which the Arabic edition of the Nicæan Canons calls their "Ordination." The Bishop imposed his hand on their heads, gave them a dark-coloured habit for their costume, and they themselves took the sacred veil from the altar and placed it on their heads. The Bishop then placed a stole on their shoulders, which they are represented wearing in the pictures of the catacombs, gave them a ring as the symbol of their fidelity, and placed an ornament like a coronet upon their heads.

That virgins were included under the name of widows is plain from a rule in the Apostolic Constitutions, which says—"Let a modest virgin be elected deaconess; but if not a virgin, let her be at least a widow who has been only once married." (Apostol. Const. L. 6, c. 17.) Amidst the frightful dissoluteness of the Roman Empire, whilst the Christians were still a persecuted minority, and whilst public opinion, purposely kept up by pagan zealots, charged them with secret and gross immoralities, just as like charges are kept up against priests and nuns from analogous motives at this day; these mature aged deaconesses, appearing as widows, were an indispensable provision for protecting the reputation of bishops and clergy in their relations with the female portion of their flocks. It is recorded that the deaconesses stood by as witnesses at their interviews. But these interviews were not so often

required, because it was the office of the deaconesses themselves to instruct the women and girls preparing to enter the Christian Church. And at their baptism, given by immersion, they prepared the neophytes, brought them properly costumed from an adjoining chamber to the font, and when the sacred unction was applied, the bishop anointed the forehead only, whilst the deaconess anointed the rest of the members of the body. The 4th Council of Carthage enjoins—“Let the widows and nuns (*moniales*) who are chosen for the ministry of baptising women, be well instructed in their office, and capable and ready to teach the ignorant and rustic women preparing for baptism, both how they are to answer, and how they must live after their baptism.” When the persecution grew hot and fierce, and the Bishop had to conceal himself, the deaconesses were the medium of communication between him and the females of the scattered flock, as the deacons were his messengers to the men. This implied great confidence, but exposure to great perils. They had also to sustain the weaker members of their sex in constancy, and to encourage them in their sufferings, St. Paul says that Prisca and Aquila had risked their own necks to save his life, and hence the gratitude of the churches towards them.

But these were not their only functions. Like the *ostiarii* on the men's side of the Church, they kept the doors on the women's side. This was a critical office that demanded both judgment and firmness. They must know who were really Christians, and they must distinguish the communicants from the penitents of various degrees, as well as from the catechumens; and when Christians are strangers, they must examine their

commendatory letters, passing each on to their allotted place in the aisle or in the porches. Within the Church, as the deacons on the men's side, so the deaconess on that of the women, kept all in order, and each one in her allotted place. First stood the consecrated virgins, separated by a partition; then the matrons, after them, the younger portion of the flock, a fourth place was for the catechumens, a fifth for the penitents. The strangers were to be put in honourable places. The catechumens were all to be cleared out before the Canon of the Mass began. They had also the solemn duty of assisting the women in receiving the holy communion. Whilst these were the deaconess's duties inside the primitive churches, outside they had committed to them the care of the consecrated virgins, of the widows, of the orphans and the poor who were helped or supported by the Church's charities. They had to search them out, to keep lists of them, to report their condition to the Bishop, to comfort, instruct, and help them.

Every particle of this description is drawn from contemporary records, and chiefly from documents ranging from the first to the end of the third century, and it proves beyond all doubt that the primitive Christians had their sisters of charity and of mercy, suited to their times and requirements, as the Catholic Church has theirs at this day.

Although in the first and most difficult days of the Gospel, before families had grown up in Christianity, widows were more numerous in this office than virgins: St. Chrysostom tells us that in his own day the virgins consecrated to God had become a much more numerous body than the widows. The deaconesses continued until the sixth century in the Western Church, and are last

heard of in the east in the Eighth century. As the civilized nations became wholly Christian, and the general condition of woman was shaped into the state of Christian freedom, their peculiar offices ceased to be required, and in the work of teaching and exercising charity, they were superseded by the regular communities of nuns.

In order to explain the origin of the nuns or consecrated virgins, we must go back to the period of the Gospel; for, from the first they existed side by side with the deaconesses, and in the first three centuries they were placed under their care and responsibility; and more especially had the deaconesses the care of those amongst them who depended on the Church for their maintenance; all, however, had their names entered on the ecclesiastical registers. St. John Chrysostom says that one of the most anxious and laborious duties of a Bishop in his time was that of deciding what virgins and widows ought to be placed on the Church's register, and that on the register of the Church of Constantinople alone three thousand of these Religious women stood enrolled.

We have already spoken of the vast influence arising out of the virginal example of our Blessed Lord, of his Blessed Mother, of John the Baptist, and of John the Evangelist; indeed our Lord, in his reply to Peter's question, included wives amongst all things his disciples had left to follow Him; and most assuredly this is the doctrine as well as practice of the fathers who came after them. Our Divine Lord added his counsel to his example, He extolled the life of virginity as something that was nearer than the married life to the kingdom of heaven, that is to say, as something holier and more perfectly resembling the purity of God. At the conclusion of a conversation with

the Pharisees touching certain difficulties attached to marriage, our Lord said that in heaven there will be neither taking or giving in marriage; this was a reply to the Pharisees' objections, but it struck his own disciples on another side, and they failed not to see that the virginal was pointed out as the celestial life, and so, with both sides of the remark in view, they put the question, "If the case of a man with his wife be so, it is not expedient to marry?" To this our Lord gave the final response, "All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. There are those who have made themselves unmarriageable for the kingdom of heaven; let him that can take it, take it." I need hardly say that this is no condemnation of marriage, but it is certainly an elevation of the virginal above the married state, that is, when God gives the gift, when that gift is freely taken, and when the kingdom of heaven is the motive. It is no command; it is an advice to those who wish to do more for God's sake than He has commanded us to do; all take not this word, let him take it who can take it, says the God of truth.

This distinction between the commandments and the counsels of Christ; between what he gives us to observe as a law, binding all souls and binding all alike; and what, on the other hand, he only advises, and advises to those especially who seek the more perfect way, is the groundwork of the whole distinction between the common Christian life and the life of perfection. It is the distinction in its principles, between the man who divides his life betwixt God and the world, and the man who gives his whole life to God. It is also the foundation of the distinction between the married woman and the nun; an individual married woman may be holier than some individual

nun, but the state of the nun is holier than the state of the wife; and we shall presently see that St. Paul has put it in that light. Nowhere is this distinction brought out more clearly than in our Lord's conversation with that young man who had many possessions. The young man comes to Jesus and asks, "Master, what good shall I do that I may enter into life everlasting?" Jesus answers, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." The youth replies, "All these I have kept from my youth: what else is wanting to me?" Jesus looked on him, loved him, and said: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, give to the poor, and thou shalt have a treasure in heaven: and come, follow me."—Matt. c. 19.

This youth has always kept the commandments, he has done all that the Divine Master requires for gaining everlasting life, and so Jesus looked on him with love; but when he asks what is still wanting to make him perfect, then he is told to give all he has in the world to the poor, to throw in his lot with Christ, and to live in all respects as our Lord himself lived—to follow Him. In a word, he was to live like the monk and the nun, in poverty, chastity, and obedience; and if, like that young man, who went away sad, having many possessions, you think this advice hard and difficult, our Lord does not deny it, he says to his disciples, "With men this is impossible, but all things are possible with God." Then Peter said to him: "Behold, we have left all things, and have followed thee: what therefore shall we have?" and Jesus said unto them, "Amen, I say to you, every one that hath left house, or wife, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundred-fold, and shall possess life everlasting." Here, then,

is the apostolic life, the life of Christ himself, the perfect life, the life also of the monk and of the nun; and what greater or more magnificent confirmation of it could we wish to have than that vision which the virginal St. John saw in the Apocalypse, of those 144,000 virgins, who are bought from amongst men, and whose privilege it is to "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth," and to sing a canticle which none but they can repeat.

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul treats this subject professedly. He shews that the virginal life is of counsel, not of command, and that it is the fruit of a special gift. Contrasting it with marriage he declares it to be more perfect, not for all, but for those who have certain gifts, dispositions and qualifications, in a word, who have a vocation to this state of life; and mark well, how carefully St. Paul gives us the signs of this vocation—"He that *hath determined, being steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but having power over his own will, and hath judged this in his heart to keep his virgin, doth well.*"

It is for the purpose of testing the solidity of these five qualities that so long a probation is required by the Church, before any one is allowed to bind themselves to this kind of life. But of this we shall have to speak in the next lecture. As to the spiritual advantages, the sacred motives, and the peculiar holiness that attach to the Religious as contradistinguished from the secular life, the Apostle is very clear. He says—"The unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord; that she may be holy in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please

her husband." He also observes that the married are "divided," that is, given in part to God, in part to the world, whilst they who have consecrated themselves wholly to God, belong to Him without division. He also speaks of those tribulations of the married woman from which the unmarried is free. In his Second Epistle to the same Corinthians, the great Apostle uses a remarkable figure of speech, which would be altogether unmeaning, were it not based upon a fact with which both he and they were already familiar. He compares the union of the Church of Corinth with God, to the spiritual marriage between Christ and a virgin. He says—"I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God. For I have espoused you to one husband, a chaste virgin unto Christ." It is impossible for any one, who is not wilfully blind, to close his eyes to the fact, that the life of the nun rests upon the higher teaching of the Gospel, as well as upon the most sacred examples. If however this life began in the Apostolic times, we should naturally expect to find some indication of it in the Acts of the Apostles, and accordingly in that record we find, that when St. Paul and St. Luke came to Cæsarea, St. Luke says—"Entering into the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, we abode with him. And he had four daughters, virgins, who did prophecy."

Until the Emperor Constantine gave civil freedom and protection to Christianity, it is obvious that nuns could not have lived in safety in Religious communities. During the first three centuries they dwelt with their relatives, secluded in the female departments from general society. They were called *ecclesiastical* and *canonical* virgins, as I have said, being canonically matriculated on

the Church's record. They had their place of honour in the Church, separated from the laity, and St. Ambrose speaks of the inscriptions written on that part of the walls admonishing them of their holy state. And, as we have said, they were under the special care of the deaconesses. Writing about the end of the second century, Tertullian says of them—"They prefer holiness to husbands, they choose their espousals with God, they love to be God's handmaids, and to be only beautiful in his eyes, conversing with him night and day, and giving him their prayers for dowries." (Tertull. ad Uxorem.) And in his work on the Veiling of Virgins, he denounces those hands as guilty of sacrilege that could remove the veil in which they are consecrated to God. The great Bishop and Martyr, Cyprian, wrote a complete treatise, addressed to these sacred virgins, in which, amongst other things, he says—"Now do we turn our discourse to the virgins, over whom our care is all the greater as their glory is the more sublime. They are the flower of the Church's field, the charm and ornament of spiritual grace, a joyous condition of life, a perfect and inviolate work of praise and honour, an image of God that corresponds with the sanctity of Christ, the more illustrious portion of Christ's flock. In them doth rejoice, in them doth richly flourish, the glorious fruitfulness of Mother Church; and as her virgins grow more numerous, so grows the Mother's joy." Let me add another passage from St. Cyprian's book, if it be only to shew on what lofty ground this profession is placed by the early teaching of the Church. The holy Martyr says to the consecrated virgins of his Church—"No husband is over you, but your Lord and Head is Christ; your lot and condition is the same as his."

And after quoting our Lord's words, how after the resurrection there shall be no more marriage, no more death for those who are worthy of God, and that all shall be equal to the angels of God, he says—"What we are all to become, that you have begun to be. The glory of the resurrection you possess already: you are passing through life without life's contagion. In persevering in chastity and virginity, you are equal to the angels of God, only let that profession remain and abide perfect and inviolate. The first commandment was to increase and multiply; the second enjoined continency. Now that the earth abounds and the world is full, they who are able accept continency, living the unmarried life, and are separated unto the kingdom. The Lord does not enforce this, but he exhorts it, not imposing a yoke of necessity in that the choice remains free. Still, when He tells us that within His Father's house are many mansions, He guides us to seek a home in the best of them. The sanctity and truth of the second birth are found more fully in you, who have ceased from the desires of the flesh and the body. 'As we have borne the image of him that is earthly,' says the Apostle, 'let us also bear the image of the heavenly one.' This image virginity bears, perfectness bears it, holiness and truth bear it, rules of discipline bear it which keep God in thought, which maintain righteousness and religiousness, are stable in faith, lowly in fear, strong to all endurance, meek to suffer injury, swift in exercising pity, uniting heart and mind in brotherly love. All these things it is your duty, O virgins, to regard, to love, to fulfil, who, giving your time to God and Christ, are already advancing forward unto the Lord, to whom you have dedicated yourselves, in

the higher and better way." Such was the language addressed by Bishops to nuns in the middle of the third century after Christ.

Only Bishops could give the sacred veil to those who accepted this state of life, even from earliest times ; lest, says St. Ambrose, there should be anything done rashly and to the dishonour of the Church. It was for the highest official in the Church to see that all canonical requirements met in the person who petitioned for so great a privilege. And although the voluntary and public profession of self-devotion to a life of virginity was allowed in the primitive ages from marriageable age, and was very frequently entered upon from that age, yet the solemn rite of consecration at the hands of the Bishop in the public assemblies of the Church was not allowed before the fortieth year. The distinction between profession and consecration has existed in all periods of the Church. All nuns made public profession of their state, but all were not consecrated. The rite of consecration came after long years of profession, and was the solemn seal and confirmation of their espousals with Christ. That rite of consecration, as distinct from profession, is still contained in the Pontifical, and was used as late as by Pope Pius VI. The veil of consecration was distinguished from that of profession by having a cross embroidered upon it. The great festival of Easter Sunday was the day upon which, after the catechumens had been baptised, the virgins were consecrated. Amidst many lights, in the presence of the white-robed flock of newly-made Christians, the whole assembled Church responding to the psalms and prayers, the Bishop encircled with his clergy laid his hand upon their heads, gave them a special habit, presented them

with the purple veil, the colour worn by all those who professed virginity, and round their brows was bound a golden *mitrella* or fillet, which was a sign to all the world of their dedication to Christ, and a token to protect them from the solicitation of men. It was made a law by the Christian emperors that no one but a nun should ever wear these symbolical distinctions; and the object of this law was to secure them from profanation. St. Optatus, in the middle of the fourth century, calls this rite "a spiritual and heavenly marriage."

The first Christian emperor assigned funds from the public revenues as well for the maintenance of those nuns who had not funds of their own, as for the clergy; and his mother, the Empress Helena, was wont to invite them to her table and to serve them with her own hands. Their hours of daily and nightly psalmody and prayer, as we learn from St. Augustine and St. Jerome, were the same that are observed to this day. They tell us that reading followed prayer, and prayer reading, after which came their work. They spun and worked in wool, and the distaff or needle never left their fingers. They also educated the younger females of their families.

No sooner had the imperial power become the protector of Christianity, and the nuns felt that they could leave their paternal homes with safety, than they began to gather into communities, and to live in monasteries or convents, under the authority of one of their number called Abbess, or Mother; and their rules of life became a matter of the most careful legislation. It was in the beginning of the fourth century, in Egypt, under the great St. Antony, that the Ascetics first gathered into monasteries of women as well as of men, and the first convent of nuns was ruled by St. Antony's

sister. His famous disciple St. Pachomius, the first who wrote a rule that remains to this day, established a convent also under his sister's directions. It was through the influence of the great St. Athanasius, during his visits to Rome, that the conventual system first arose in the capital of Christendom, and St. Jerome gave it a more complete development. I have noticed that the two first founders of conventual life placed their female monasteries under the care of their sisters, but it is remarkable that all the great founders of Religious rules down to the sixth century did the same. St. Basil, the great founder of Eastern monasticism, whose rule alone prevails even to this day in the Greek Church, founded his nuns under his sister St. Macrina; St. Ambrose founded his at Milan under his sister St. Marcellina; St. Augustine, whose famous rule was written expressly for his nuns, founded them under the direction of his sister; and St. Benedict, the Patriarch of Western monachism, placed his nuns under his sister St. Scholastica. If St. Gregory the Great had not the aid of a sister, he had the experience of three aunts, who were nuns, to aid him in regulating his convents; and his intimate friend St. Leander drew up the first conventual rule for Spain, expressly for the aid of his sister Florentia, who lived to preside over a thousand nuns in forty convents. It is obvious that this co-operation of brother and sister in the founding of the chief conventual Rules and Institutions was a providential arrangement of great importance; for their great intimacy of soul under conditions so void of suspicion, enabled them to unite the founder's wisdom with the foundress's experience of her sex and of its requirements in the most effectual way for

the final benefit of the order. It is surprising to what an extent some of the greater convents grew. There was one in Egypt, at Oxyrinchus, which had ten thousand nuns ; it was a complete town of convents, choirs succeeded each other in the Churches day and night, so that the divine praises never ceased, and the streets were said to be almost as light in the night as the day, from the many lamps whose rays streamed through the windows. With the fruit of their labours the nuns supported the poor of the cities. Even our own Convent of Wimbourne under St. Lioba had five hundred nuns within its walls.

To take a passing glance at the foundation of conventual life in our own country, as it was converted to Christianity by two great monastic orders, that of the Irish St. Columba and that of the Italian St. Benedict, so the women of our Saxon race owed their Christian training and the finer graces of their minds to those convents of nuns which the Bishops of those orders established wherever they came. The first founders of those convents were nearly all of them the daughters of our Saxon kings or nobles, whilst nine of our Saxon queens left their thrones for the purpose of entering those convents or of founding them. In no part of the world are there so many cities, towns and villages that owe their existence to the populations gathering round the convents as in England, and it may interest you to know that the first Bibles used in Germany were written by the pens of English nuns, and sent to that band of English missionaries led on by St. Boniface to whom Germany owes its conversion from heathenism. So soon as Germany was sufficiently prepared by those English monks, the English

nuns themselves went forth, and founded the communities which trained the women of Germany in Christian life and manners.

I have shewn in this lecture how the principles and motives of the conventual life are rooted and founded in the Gospel of Christ; how the Apostolic age had its organization of Sisters of Charity adapted to its special needs in the institution of deaconesses; how the virginal or ascetic life of nuns is also coeval with Christianity; and how, so soon as the condition of the Church in the world gave security to the independent life of women, this ascetic life took the shape of the conventual system. That individual abuses arose in the unsettled period of the early Church, we chiefly know from the remedies provided against them by the early Councils. But these abuses became much more rare, when, instead of living in their paternal homes, the nuns were gathered into communities, and when they lived by rules provided for them by the great and experienced Saints, were governed by elected superioresses, and watched over by their Bishops with fatherly solicitude. The great reform of St. Benedict was effected by introducing the principle of stability. By its force each Religious was bound to the monastery where profession was made, and had a claim to maintenance for life from its funds. The introduction of this principle was the crowning of the edifice of monasticism.

And now let me utter a decisive word in reply to those tales of scandal, not one of which has ever been brought home to our convents. In various parts of England or of Australia I have been for five-and-thirty years a superior of convents, and have had nearly a thousand of those Religious ladies under my charge at one time or

other, and I solemnly declare that I never was acquainted with a single case where a nun had violated her vow. Thanks to God's grace, and to the special grace of vocation, I have never known so dreadful a sacrilege.

Those endless tales flow out of a Protestant tradition, and are kept alive by anti-Catholic feeling; and as I have said so much on the origin of nuns, I may conclude with a word on the origin of these traditions. They come from the German Reformation; they go back to the days when Luther and Bucer and other heroes of the great change renounced their solemn vows to God and to His Church, and then induced certain nuns of their acquaintance to quit their convents and do the same. And so they married,—that is, according to the laws of Church and State throughout Europe for a thousand years, they committed the grievous crime of sacrilege. Luther was the first to point out the degrading motives that influenced the conduct of his followers; and then he sank under them himself. Depend upon it, whenever a Catholic priest or a nun goes seriously wrong, you will hear of it, as you have done in past times. They will be the first to let you know. Their undeviating rule has been to leave us and to go over to a rival religion, which first welcomes them, and after awhile throws them aside. Dean Swift, in his shrewd and penetrating way, was wont to say on such occasions, that the Pope was doing them the ill turn of pulling up the weeds of his own garden to throw them over the wall into theirs.

My next lectures will take us into the interior life of convents.

LECTURE SECOND.

THE SPIRIT OF CONVENTUAL LIFE.

MY BRETHREN,—I shall not be far wrong in supposing that a considerable number of our countrymen, if asked what they thought about convents and nuns, would give the offhand reply with unhesitating confidence, that they are a foreign importation, out of joint with our institutions, and incapable of harmonizing with the liberties of the English people. Can that however be un-English which flourished and was popular amongst Englishmen for a thousand years? Un-Protestant these institutions undoubtedly are, but assuredly not un-English. For a thousand years, the royal, noble and gentle women of England, the mothers of a bold, free and hardy race, were trained in all their finest qualities within the walls of English convents. For a thousand years the poorer and more needy children of the British soil were fed at their gates, and in their sickness were harboured in their hospitals; and when those convents covered the land, when the kings, the queens, and the nobles were their chief founders and protectors, when prisons were few and poor houses not in being, though there was poverty in the land, there was no pauperism and far less crime.

Tacitus says—and who like him has penetrated into the darker side of human motives—that it is

a property of human nature, to prolong your hatred where you have inflicted injury. If this be true to nature, as unhappily it is, Protestantism will not easily surrender its historical dislike to convents. This is not the place for entering into the history of their suppression, into the base and sordid motives which actuated their destroyers, or into the history of that new nobility that rose up from nothing into wealth and station upon their ruin. On that subject I can only refer you to Spelman's History of Sacrilege.

A wide wasting sacrilege, by like instruments, from the same sordid motives, is going on at this very day in Italy. England knows but little in detail of what is proceeding in that unhappy country. I have a document before me, written by an eye witness, and describing in one single example what is being perpetrated all over the land. In a valley of the Arno, near Florence, there is a Convent of Benedictine nuns, whose forty inmates have served God day and night in great fidelity, some for thirty, some for forty, some for fifty, some even for sixty years. They have been celebrated for hospitality to strangers and for kindness to the poor; and now the royal commissioners have swept down upon them, seized their lands, confiscated their funds, and taken possession of even such little articles of furniture as, from being works of art, were of marketable value, and in exchange for their all, they have given these ladies a miserable pittance of some twopence halfpenny a day for each; and, like all their sisters in other parts, they will soon be turned out of their home, to seek a shelter where they may. The only hope they have of escaping this fate is the effort their friends are making to gather a little money for them to purchase from their plunderers that guest

hall, in which formerly their hospitality was dispensed, there to huddle together in their penury until they die. It is easy to conceive how these pitiless men, made hard by grasping what belongs to God and the innocent, will set a tradition on foot against nuns and convents, such as England has cherished for three hundred years. Yet be it well known that English conventual life was never wholly interrupted. English Catholics kept up the succession of their religious orders abroad until they could return once more to their native soil. English Benedictines and Augustinians, Dominicans and Franciscans, Carmelites and Brigittines have continued the lines of their ancient English sisters, despite of every effort to destroy them. It is not so easy to put an end to an element of the Catholic Church, especially when that element has for its leading qualities the virtues of patience, humility, and self-denial.

I verily believe that not a few English people prefer an imaginary representation to a truthful knowledge of convents, a sensational to a common sense way of thinking about them. They like to keep their notions of them in a mysterious and romantic twilight, as a something for fancy to play about, and for invention to people with ghostly horrors. It is a relief for a hard working, prosy, matter of fact people, to have the materials for the manufacture of their romances ready and near at hand, and this is one of the main difficulties in the way of getting these people to rightly understand what a convent is. For in its own way, a convent is a very matter of fact kind of place, and nuns are a very hard working people, and they have very decided notions besides as to their own rights and privileges. But before we prove that these are their characteristics, let us try to

get a little nearer to some of the common notions respecting them that we find in circulation. We shall do this with least expenditure of time, if we throw these notions into the shape of definitions.

Convents.—Prisons so called. The cells within them are cellars, and their inhabitants given to moping and to melancholy. Nuns.—Demure hypocrites. These definitions may be gathered from the conversational lexicons of certain sectarians; also from the vocabularies of impure and of godless men. Strange accordance in minds discordant!

Convents.—Mysterious seclusions, about which we hear much but know little. Nuns.—Romantic people who, under the pressure of sorrow, disappointment or trial, imaginary or real, have quitted the world to bury themselves in the dull routine of a cloister. These are something like the views entertained by many good hearted Protestants and well meaning persons.

Convents.—Beautifully romantic places, with long drawn vaults and corridors, steeped in strongly contrasted lights and shadows; having secret cells, and underground mysteries; admirably adapted for tragic plots and sensational scenery. Nuns.—Austere figures in hood, wimple and weeds; silent carriers of secret sorrows long pent up, but yearning for the hour of deliverance. Pale faced victims of cunning priests.

Female Jesuits.—Excellent lay figures on which to hang picturesque abominations, especially if the background be gloomy and suggestive of unfathomable darkness. Some of these definitions belong to romance writers and novelists, others of them to itinerant, and non-itinerant, anti-Catholic lecturers.

Having heard the definitions of ignorance and

the descriptions of malice, it is but fair we should turn the other ear, and listen to the definitions of knowledge and the portraits of affection.

Convents.—Abodes of peace and happiness ; where God is loved and served above all things, and where every one is loved and served for God's sake ; ,mansions in which the grace of God shines with light and power, in the midst of a dark and troubled world. Nuns.—The kindest, strongest, and most cheerful of women. So speak the multitudes of Catholic mothers and daughters who have been trained within convent walls.

Convents.—Places from which you are never turned back hungry or naked. Nuns.—Ladies who never degrade you in your misery, or make you ashamed of your poverty, but always do the kind act in the kindest way. So speak the poor around them, and the miserable who go miles out of their track to find the convent door.

And how does the nun herself regard her convent ? She calls it the ark of refuge from the deluge ; the oasis of tranquillity ; the abode of religious freedom ; the asylum of charity and prayer ; and, in her vein of scriptural poetry she will add, that it is the enclosed garden of the true Solomon ; the abode of Christ's spouses ; the house of God and gate of heaven. Ask this nun about herself, and she will probably give you an arch smile, implying that neither self nor selfishness are themes for nuns to descant upon. But ask what she would say respecting nuns in general, what as compared with their friends in the world, and she might answer you in St. Bernard's words, which for nine hundred years have found an echo amongst the virgins of Christ,—“ They live more purely, they fail less frequently, they rise up from failure more quickly, they walk on through life more safely,

they are refreshed with consolation more frequently, they enjoy repose of heart more securely, they leave this life for the next more confidently, they are purified from the rusts of mortality more speedily, and they are rewarded of God more abundantly." I may add, and that without fear of contradiction, that of the thousands of Protestants, who as well as Catholics, visit our convents and become acquainted with their inhabitants, no one ever carried away the impression that they are gloomy, constrained, dispirited, or unhappy.

Having given you both the exterior and the interior views entertained of convents, the impressions of ignorance and the testimonies of knowledge; it remains for me to introduce you to those constitutional principles upon which they are founded, and the safeguards to freedom with which they are invested. Here, however, we shall need some standard of comparison already familiar to the mind, and this presents itself in the domestic family, the first of all societies, and the type of human freedom. In the family, authority, obedience and liberty are to be found in their happiest combination. Yet that charm of freedom which so happily pervades a well-ordered family, must be confessed to depend for its preservation upon the authority which rules, and the obedience which cheerfully responds to rule. Then there is the element which more than others nourishes unity and freedom, and this is to be found in the community life, resting as it does upon a property which though administered by the head, is for the common benefit of all. To this must we add community of thought, feeling and aim. And if to the natural and acquired accomplishments of that family be added the Christian graces and virtues, if to the family

affection be added Christian love, then have we the happiest conditions of human freedom, and the most delightful society of which the world has any experience. The ties of mind enhance the ties of blood, and the ties of blood give vigour to the ties of affection. And each family has its marked individuality, an individuality of character that flows from its moral qualities, and in which it differs from other families, as face differs from face, mind from mind, and heart from heart. One thing more, however, is needed which we cannot overlook with safety. That spirit, essence, air, tone, aroma, call it what you will, for it is the undefinable charm that breathes through the interior family circle, depends entirely for its growth and conservation upon the sacred privacy of home. Nothing foreign or uncongenial to it can enter within the domestic circle, all that is relegated to one or two reception rooms or parlours, precisely as in a convent. The seclusion of the family precincts, the right of a domestic retreat where no one has power to intrude, the sacred privacies of home, the inviolable security of the threshold, amidst the crowded dwellings of our towns even as in the tents of the desert, these are amongst the rights of humanity on which are based both the freedom of the family and the securities of public liberty.

In drawing this description of the family, I feel that I have given you the accurate delineation of a convent, and that there is not a single point in which the resemblance fails. So true is this, that the Church calls her religious communities religious families. Painful indeed is it to witness the dissipation and loss of the family spirit, resulting from the incessant changes and locomotions of these restless days. And it looks

indeed as if, as time went on, the old family seclusion with its inexpressible charms, would be left in almost exclusive possession of religious communities. All complain of this, all by complaining confess its evils, yet no one looks to a remedy. It is the genius of the times, and the times have much of evil in them.

After admitting the general resemblance between the convent and the family, it may be said that in two points at least the resemblance fails, and that they make all the difference, and these are the strong ties of blood and the influence arising from the gradual growth of a family beneath the parental care. Yet even here, I do not hesitate in saying that the religious family presents strong analogies with these elements of domestic union. To understand this, however, requires you to realise the devout Catholic's depth of feeling respecting the Real Presence of Christ on the Altar, as being the very heart and centre of conventual life; and the almost daily reception of Christ's body and blood by the members of that family, as being the very closest of their ties of union with each other, as well as with God. Only you must understand the force derived from the veritable blood of Christ flowing into breasts united daily for its reception, and the veritable unity as of a divine consanguinity resulting therefrom. For the Protestant view will not allow you to comprehend the force of the Catholic Mystery upon pure and innocent hearts. As to the second point, the influence derived from growth beneath parental care, this also has its striking analogy in the conventual life. But of this more fully when we come to speak of the noviciate; suffice it here to observe that a community like a family is gradually recruited from youthful mem-

bers, trained to their new life under a care that is singularly maternal, and this gives growth to the closest filial affection.

The first of all Religious communities was that of Our Lord himself and his twelve Apostles. At his invitation they left all things to follow him, they obeyed his voice, and they had all things in common. The second community sprang out of the first, it was the Christian Church of Jerusalem. After the Ascension, the Apostles are described in the upper room where they abode, as "all persevering in one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." Even after the Pentecost, this community life continues, and is the normal state of the Church in Jerusalem. First, all the members of this Christian society are "baptized into one spirit." Secondly, by a new kind of consanguinity, they are able to say—"We being many, are one bread, one body, all who partake of one bread." For "the cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? And the bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. x. 16, 17). The third principle of their unity is their subjection to the Apostles. The fourth is the renunciation of their private property for the general support of the community. Let us hear St. Luke's description of this religious family, now that it has reached the number of three thousand souls: "And they were persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles, and in the communication of the breaking of bread, and in prayer. . . . And all they that believed were together, and they had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all according as every one had

need. And daily persevering with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread in the houses, they took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people" (Acts ii. 42—46). After this community has expanded into five thousand souls, St. Luke says: "The multitude of believers had one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that ought of the things he possessed was his own, but all things were common to them. And great grace was in them all. For neither was any one among them needy; for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things they sold and laid them down at the feet of the Apostles; and distribution was made to every one according as he had need" (Acts iv. 33—35).

Translate these inspired descriptions from a mixed community of the two sexes to a community of ladies under one roof, and, word for word, you have the accurate delineation of conventual life; so accurate indeed that most of St. Luke's words are repeated in the Monastic Rules. You cannot fail, then, to observe that the first of all Christian churches, that Apostolic Church, that Church of Sion, is the type not of the churches elsewhere established but of the conventual and monastic life. That most primitive of primitive churches, to use a language familiar with the oppugners of convents, was singular amongst all churches for living a conventual life, and for its ascetic self-denial and obedience. It was a Church in the form of a single family, in which character its succession is only to be found in the line of Religious communities.

I now come to the chief point of this lecture, which is to shew that the spirit of conventual life

is a spirit of freedom. And I shall best illustrate this spirit of freedom by comparing it with the freedom of domestic life.

No one can set up a convent at will, or as a matter of speculation, or an act of caprice. It must be the work of ecclesiastical authority. The convent must belong to some approved Order, whose principles and rules have had the test of experience. For whenever a new Order arises, the Church is slow and cautious in giving it approval. It experimentalizes; has no other authority at first but that of the local bishop; feels its way, corrects its first essays by further experience, and meanwhile, it is not considered as an Order but as a mere essay. Its vows are not Religious, or public, but only private vows, like those of any private person. The attempt fails; or perhaps the new Institute succeeds and proves its value; shews it can stand, and do its work, and secure the happiness of its members. Then, and not till then, the highest authority in the Church takes it in hand for examination, but not until a considerable period of time has elapsed. The last Institute, or Order, with whose approval I had any concern, had done its work for two hundred years, and had spread from France to England, and even to China and Japan, before the Holy See gave it approval, and fixed its position in the Church as a conventual order. Before this approval can be accorded, the constitution and rules are put into the hands of the ablest experts, are passed from them to a congregation of Cardinals, the wisest and most learned in such matters, and after being corrected by searching tests, derived from the universal experience of the Church both past and present, after obtaining all the modification it requires, it receives the

final sanction and becomes part of the Church's Religious law.

There are not above half a dozen Rules distinct from each other in their fundamental conditions throughout the whole Western Church. All the rest are but modifications based upon the principles of one or more of these. The East has one Rule only for both sexes, that of St. Basil. As some persons have delighted to represent the various Orders of the Church as so many different sects, I may as well observe that they are rather like the different arms of one service, each equipped and trained for its special work, whilst all are under one general command. The spiritual basis of each Rule is drawn from the Sacred Scriptures, and to this is added a system of internal government, and a body of regulations directing the life and occupations of the members. The interpretation of this Rule lives in the traditions and observances of the convent, and in the practical good sense of the community. Should a difficulty arise on any point, other houses of the same Order are consulted, and especially the more ancient and authoritative of them. And there is always a final appeal to the higher authorities, when the common law of the Church is brought to throw light upon the local law. Ancient Rules, such as the Benedictine, dating from the sixth century, are modified in their practical application by a body of constitutional declarations, suiting them to modern times and exigencies.

A person therefore who should attempt to get a clear notion of the practicable habits of a modern convent, by studying the letter of its ancient Rule, except in so far as its general spirit is concerned, would be led as far wrong as if he tried to realise the modern constitution of England from

a knowledge of the Saxon Heptarchy. These constitutions are the Acts of General Chapters of the Order; and a General Chapter is a sort of Council or Parliament in which the Order discusses and passes laws through its representatives. They are held every four years, and the various provinces as well as houses from every nation where the Order exists, are represented in them by delegates.

This, however, would only affect convents belonging to great congregations. Convents of another class, obtain their new regulations, when change of circumstances makes them needful, through the Episcopal authority, or that of the Holy See. The General Chapters or Councils of Religious Orders are, after the Councils of the Church, the oldest representative bodies in Christendom; and England in her studied ignorance of what the Catholic Church has done for her in past ages, is little aware how much she owes of her own first start on the path of constitutional government to the example and influence of her old Monastic Orders.

Every convent must have its Rule, the Rule of the Order to which it belongs, and that Rule must be fixed in writing. It is printed, and each nun has a copy of it. This Rule lays down with the utmost exactness how far the authority of the Superior goes, and where it stops and can go no further. The sphere of each subordinate official is marked out with equal precision. The choral duties, community observances, the duties and employments which they undertake, the general distribution of time, everything even to the general character of the clothing and food is regulated and provided for in the Rule. The Rule is in fact the superior of the superior, who has simply to

obey its directions. She is the executive of the Rule, and her life is as much a life of obedience to its dictates as that of her subjects. "Let all obey the Rule as their mistress," is a conventual maxim as old as the days of St. Benedict. Of the sense of the Rule the good customs and living traditions of the house and of the Order are the interpreters. Should a perplexity arise, there is the ecclesiastical authority to apply to, and that authority has the common law of the Church and its wide experience ready to enlighten the difficulty and make all clear.

Now it is a fundamental principle of conventual life which allows of no exception, that no nun is bound to an obedience beyond what is prescribed in the Rule. The very terms of her vow include this qualifying clause—"I vow obedience according to the Rule." And the Rule to whose terms she limits the obligation of her obedience is that very Rule which she has been reading, studying, hearing explained, and seeing put in practice for years before she takes her vow. Were a superior to lift her little finger beyond the Rule it would be, not authority, but tyranny, and means would soon be found to bring it back to its proper position. For nuns are great constitutionalists, they are thoroughly conversant with their rights and liberties as well as with their duties. They are in the habit of exercising their individual judgments completely as to the condition of their whole little commonwealth on the occasion of elections and of visitations, and that not as matter of choice but of duty. And they have their right of appeal not only to the Episcopal but even to the very highest authority of the Church.

And here the parallel between the family and the convent breaks down. For in the household

there is no fixed code, no chartered limit to obedience, no check against caprice, unreasonable conduct, or even cruelty, except through the scandal of exposure in a public court.

Let us contemplate a convent canonically erected, in full action, living under its written Rule, and carrying on its traditional customs and observances. In modern times it is extremely rare to find a community whose superior is appointed for life. Brief periods of government began with the Orders that sprang up in the thirteenth century, and this policy has been accepted by the more ancient Orders as well as by all the new ones. Four at most, but much more frequently three years is the term prescribed by Rule for which a superioress is elected to govern. In a considerable number of Rules, after having been elected for two successive terms of three years, the same superioress cannot be re-elected until another has governed for a term.

Those who have all their lives entertained notions of the slavery and tyranny of the conventual system, must now prepare themselves for a shock of surprise. Nuns enjoy self-government, and the principles upon which their government rests, and has flourished for the last five hundred years and more, are the three points of the charter—universal suffrage, vote by ballot, and triennial elections. The first two points of universal suffrage and the ballot date from the earliest beginnings of conventual life in the fourth century; the third point, that of triennial elections, begun, as I have said, with the popular mendicant orders of the beginning of the thirteenth century, and has extended to all the rest. Yes, it is undeniable, all over the world the three points of the charter form the principles of conventual government.

You may ask me, perhaps—If this system works so well in convents, and even in great Religious corporations, uniting those of several nations into one body, why will it not work well for political society and for national governments? It is not for me to treat that question here; but I will point out some of the differences that exist between the two cases. In the world everybody is struggling to be first, but in the convent each one aims, and is expected to aim, at taking the last place. In the convent, every voter is fully acquainted with the constitution, the laws, and the exigencies of the community. Then, again, all the voters, as well as those voted for, are on a perfect social equality. The eligible or electable, again, are intimately known to the electors, and both parties have not only a joint but an equal interest. Moreover, there is no canvassing for votes; the least approach to such a practice would utterly disqualify for office. Then, again, there can be no bribery, and there can be no intimidation. Add to all which, the members prepare for their decision, as for a religious act, by days of prayer, approach to the consideration of it as to a most solemn and sacred responsibility, and each sister gives her silent vote for that member of the community whom, in her conscience, she believes the fittest of them all to promote the general welfare.

The day has arrived when the retiring Superior gives up her office, and resigns her keys into the hands of the ecclesiastical authority. She then retires into her rank in the community as a private member, and the keys pass to the second Superioress, who takes her place during the days of vacancy. For an interval, during which the chair of authority is vacant, is wisely allowed to

intervene, that the influence of the late Superior may not weigh upon the voters, that the community may feel its headless condition, and pray and reflect on its coming duty. On the day of election the Bishop enters the sanctuary of the convent with his assessors, and the nuns assemble in their choir; prayers are said, a suitable instruction is given, and the election commences. I choose for description the last election over which I presided. To those who are curious about methods of using the ballot, the description will not be devoid of interest.

Those who are eligible—that is, who are capable of being voted for—must have a standing in the community of a certain number of years. In the case I allude to, the eligible amount to from twenty to twenty-five members, whilst the number of voters is about fifty. The first three members of the council act as scrutators; but should a vote turn up in favour of one of them, that one retires from the scrutiny, and the fourth member of the council takes her place. Lists of all the eligibles are delivered round to each voter in her stall; but should the receiver of the list be an eligible, her own name is left out of the list she receives. Each voter then turns in her stall, and clips out the name of the sister for whom she votes, folding it into a voting paper. The community then advances in procession to the urn, placed on the sanctuary railing in front of the Bishop, and each drops in her billet as she passes by. The votes are then examined by the Bishop, entered by his assessor, and passed on to the sister scrutators, who do in like manner. If, on comparing the entries, a majority of the whole number is found to unite upon one name, the election is declared. But, in this instance, three successive votings fail

in presenting a majority. But, after this triple failure, the Rule prescribes another method, to which we must now have recourse. Two urns are produced instead of one, and on these are placed in large letters the names of the two sisters who have received the greatest number of suffrages in the previous voting. The community again advance in procession, each member dropping a white ball into the urn bearing the name of her for whom she votes, and a black one into the other. But after two votings according to this method, they still fail to present a majority. Then we have recourse to the final method provided by the Rule. It is clear that the point is reduced to a choice between two of the sisters, and that the numbers given for the two cannot be so very unequal. The community then leave the balloting to the three sister scrutators, and the first voting necessarily decides the question. No sooner is the superioress proclaimed than she is conducted to her official stall, where she receives the homage of the community, and all the papers connected with the voting are burnt in their presence. The moment the superioress is elected all the other offices in the convent expire. The chief officials, such as the sub-prioress or assistant, the novice mistress, and the bursar, are elected, either with or without their being first proposed by the superioress, as the Rule may prescribe. The minor offices are in the appointment of the superioress herself, with the advice of her council. This council has not only the office of advising the superioress in all matters of importance, but the prerogative also of representing and suggesting. And when to these grave senior members you likewise add the chief officials, who may or may not be of the council, together with those

sisters who are placed over the management of any important school or charitable institution annexed to the convent, you will not fail to see that a superioress is surrounded not only with help but with light, that may be considered as fairly incorporating the good sense, wisdom, and experience of the body over which she presides. But there are grave junctures now and again, critical moments involving some great expenditure or new undertaking, when the whole community is called to council, each sister, from her place in the assembled chapter, delivering her opinion in her turn.

In some Orders there is another precaution taken. Two experienced sisters are appointed as *zealators*, whose office it is to point out to the superioress any grave deviation from the letter or spirit of the Rule. Yet all these constitutional elements work in harmony and due subordination. How this is effected is scarcely, however, intelligible in the elevated sense in which I understand it, unless you have some knowledge of the high training through which each sister passes before she becomes, properly speaking, a member of the community. On that training we will speak presently, but one of its results is to generate a cheerful habit of surrendering personal considerations and private interests to the common welfare and happiness of the sisterhood. It must also be remembered that those who govern are the elect of those highly-trained women. I may seem to be speaking of an Utopia; but that is my very difficulty, that, compared with any other form of society, a well-ordered convent is an Utopia;—it is a mode of social life more complete and excellent in its nature than the world's experience can imagine to be practicable or possible. But then, as I have said,

this mode of life requires a very peculiar preparation. A lady has a great deal to do and a great deal to undo, much to learn and much to unlearn, before she can be transformed into a nun. This work is done in the noviciate.

The noviciate is the period of probation, and the length of time required for it is prescribed by the Rule. During this period of probation no obligation can be taken. Whoever is but a novice may leave the convent any moment, or be sent away at any moment. The noviciate is itself preceded by a preliminary probation called the postulate. A young lady, or more commonly her friends for her, opens a communication with a convent, and expresses the wish to be allowed to qualify herself for the conventual life. Enquiries follow on the other side, very much as would be done in a question of marriage. If all is found satisfactory, especially as to character and antecedents, the young lady is received, not as a nun, not even as a novice, but as a postulant. That is to say, she is in the rank of a petitioner. She joins those who are in that rank, is under the mistress of postulants, shares the postulants' common room, and has a private apartment to herself. These private rooms, of which every member of a community has one, are called cells. But, in face of the whole Protestant tradition, I beg to state that a convent cell is not a cellar, nor a place of confinement. It is neither under the ground, nor on the ground. It is simply neither more nor less than a lady's room. The postulants do not put on the habit of the Order, but for the sake of avoiding distinctions, they wear a plain uniform dress. They remain in this rank for about six months, joining in the community duties, learning to recite the Divine Office in

choir, taking their place in the common refectory, and getting a general insight into the kind of life which they are petitioning to enter upon. Not unfrequently this first step is the last. The postulant finds the state unsuited to her, or the community find her to be unsuited to the state, and so she leaves the convent. My experience tells me that the greater number of those who leave go against their own inclinations. And it not unfrequently happens that they themselves are utterly perplexed to understand why they should have to go. Everything pleases them, everyone is kind to them, and why they should not be made nuns, as well as others, is what they cannot comprehend.

Piety alone will not make a nun. Nor if a person is in the habit of praying all day long, will that prove her qualification. It is proverbial amongst Catholics that it is the lively, sociable girls of a family who go to convents, and who stay there. A lonely and isolated spirit is absolutely disqualified. Whoever is close-minded, or of a stiff and formal habit, or of a self-asserting disposition, or inclined to mope, or to brood within herself, or is twisted to singularity, whoever is disfavoured by one or more of these characteristics, has no hope or likelihood of ever becoming a nun, even though she enter a convent; unless it be that her defect is merely on the surface, and is found to be removable through the discipline of the noviciate.

An anecdote will best illustrate what I have next to point out. When, in the year 1838, I introduced a community of Sisters of Charity into New South Wales, I was called upon the morning following their arrival by a young lady, a stranger to me, who told me she had come on the part of

another young lady who wished to enter the convent. Suspecting something a little romantic, I asked if the young lady was a Protestant, my visitor being evidently one herself. She replied, "My friend is a Protestant, but I assure you she is quite prepared to enter a convent. She has had no less than three disappointments." I could only answer, although kindly, that I feared she would have a fourth. I then explained that a convent is the very last place for wounded and disappointed natures to take refuge in. Often indeed do these children of grief and pain fly to the parlours of convents for consolation and advice. But the sacred interior of the convent is no place for that bitterness or that sadness which spring from defeats encountered in the world. It is no home for any form of egotism, not even the egotism of sorrow. God, and God alone, must be the one great object of thought and affection within those hallowed precincts. And the true service of God is cheerful, generous, and forgetful of self.

If the postulant goes well through her six months as a petitioner, if her mistress, and the superioress and the council are satisfied with her, the question is put to the votes of the community, whether they will admit her to the noviciate. If the votes of the community prove favourable, the fact is submitted to the Bishop. He then, by himself or by deputy, examines into her dispositions. If the examination prove satisfactory, a day is appointed for the ceremonial, the postulant receives the habit of the Order, is invested with the white veil, and becomes a novice. The real probation now begins. It is a maxim of the noviciate, dating from the time of St. Benedict and earlier, that a novice must be tried in all the practises of

the Order with greater strictness than is required of the community. *Praedicentur ei omnia dura et aspera*, let all that is hardest and sharpest on this path to God be plainly foreshown to her—such is the monastic Rule. Whilst thus trained and tried in external works, for their internal formation, the novices pass through a complete course of ascetic and spiritual instruction, are made acquainted with the Rule and constitutions, and are informed in all the laws and customs of the Order.

But there is an art and skill of training demanded of the novice mistress which is of incalculably greater importance than any formal instructions. This demands a clear insight into the dispositions and workings of souls, great patience and self command, a kind and sympathising spirit, combined with firmness and decision, great tact, and judgment to use the happy moment for action when it comes, and to turn it to the best advantage. Hence the selecting a novice mistress who happily unites in her the felicitous qualities of her office, is sometimes more difficult than the finding a suitable superior. The noviciate has to work a transformation of the character, and that is a work of much greater difficulty to accomplish in some characters than in others. Here the right spirit, the spirit that can be moulded, is that to which our blessed Lord points when he says—“Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Nor, in fact, can the kingdom of God enter into you. You cannot shape and fashion where the material responds not freely to your hand, and to understand is to stand under, it implies the child's humility. If I were asked to describe in a few

words in what the genius of the noviciate consists, I should put it in this way.

Every one has some defect which, to others, and especially to those of a higher standing than ourselves, is visible even palpable, whilst to ourselves it is altogether concealed. Could we but see this defect, and get a conscious hold of it, we should at once correct it, and that with a sense of confusion and a feeling of shame. It may be something in ones outward manner or speech; it may go deeper into the mind or heart; it may arise from some grave deficiency in responding to God's grace; it may be a want of openness or of simplicity; it may be a deficiency of generosity or a want of sweetness. Irrascibility of temper may be the cause, or impatience and shortness of self-control; or a too scrupulous and minute way of viewing things may be sapping cheerfulness and frittering away the soul's freedom. It may be a disposition inclining to excess of self-introspection, or of self-consciousness. Or this defect may be found in an amount of self-conceit, or of human respect, that is destructive to all genuine simplicity and frankness. Whatever this defect failing from the standard of Religious life may be, the essential work of the noviciate is to bring it out to the surface, and home to the consciousness of its possessor, so that it can be freely dealt with, and removed out of the system. So when the physician, with his medical science, detects some disease that is latent in the internal structure, the first object of his skill is to bring it from a more vital to a less vital part: he brings it to the surface, and then gives the system strength to throw it off. So, again, to use Plato's example, those who sing or recite before the public have

their faults brought out and corrected by masters of the art in private rehearsals, before they come upon the public stage; and the loftiest of Greek philosophers longed for similar rehearsals for the correction of moral defects. He would have a noviciate for the human race, where the morally perfect might correct the morally imperfect.

Such a medicinal regimen, such rehearsals under a mistress already disciplined and skilful in the moral life, such a noviciate, have we in the probationary department of a convent. First, great freedom is encouraged, that defects may come out as well as excellencies; then by being crossed and exaggerated, they are brought home to the conscience; then dislike of them arises and a desire to get rid of them; and so the help of the mistress is solicited; degrees of victory give courage; as obstacles yield to tact or to effort, a new spirit is evolved, and it is more generous, large, free, humble, meek, charitable and energetic; and, finally, a new habit supersedes the old, and habit makes that easy and delightful which at first was laborious and difficult.

In the ancient Orders the noviciate is of one year; but in the new and active orders, which are incomparably the most numerous, the noviciate extends to two years. Between a fourth and a third of those who enter their probation leave the convent as failures. It was a maxim of St. Teresa's, that no convent obtained a high tone of discipline that did not send a great number of probationers away. Those who successfully complete their noviciate gain a transformation of character which to their friends often seems inexplicable. They are another, yet the same. What before was strong and beautiful, is still more

strong and beautiful ; but there is added a lucidity of mind, a gentleness of bearing, a forgetfulness of self, and a thought for others which reveals the genuine spirit of the convent, and exhibits the graces of religious vocation with a felicity of which only the possessor is unconscious. Of course there are diversities in convents as in the world, and some approach nearer than others to the type of conventual excellence ; only no one can be professed who has not a fair share of the religious gifts, and a fair promise of growth to more.

During the postulate or noviciate no one can bind herself by any obligation. If such a one be possessed of property, she cannot dispose of it, or any part of it, in order that at any moment she may be as free to leave, and to leave in as good estate as when she entered. Within two months of the expiring of her probation the novice can petition to be admitted to the vows, although were those vows actually made even an hour before the canonical period of probation was completed, the profession would be invalid and of no effect. Two months, however, before that time, if superiors are satisfied, her petition is submitted to the secret votes of the community, and if these are in her favour, the Bishop makes the canonical examination into the mind and disposition of the novice. He ascertains whether external influences have acted upon her, or whether she is acting of her own free and spontaneous attraction, is led by supernatural motives, and has the true spirit of her state. Unless all things concur favourably, there may be a further delay of some months, but if they concur to her advantage, at the termination of her noviciate the novice makes her public and

solemn vows in face of the Church, and exchanges the white for the black veil.

But even now, although a full member of the community, the young nun has not completed her training; as a junior she enters the juniorate department of the convent for a period of three years, and only after that term does she join the general community as a nun completely formed. The actual policy of the Church in this age is to limit the vows of the juniors to the term of their three years of juniorate, and only allow the perpetual vows to be taken after those three years are concluded. This gives some five years and a half of probation and training before a sister binds herself for life.

Let me again turn to the parallel between community and family life. The Church inculcates great reverence for the marriage bond. She holds it to be sacred and indissoluble. With her Divine Master, she says—"What God has united let no man put asunder." She vivifies the marriage rite with the grace and invests it with the dignity of a sacrament, giving spiritual strength from Christ to the married couple, to carry the responsibilities and trials of their state; and, when the young bride is led to the Altar, the Church pours on her head her solemn benedictions. But when that young bride vows, before God and man, obedience to her husband until death do part them, how few are her securities against abuse of authority, compared to those which attend the obedience of the nun. By the nature of the case, the bride can have no noviciate, no practice of her new life beforehand, no discretion of withdrawing, if the promise of love and kindness is not followed by performance. Above all, she has no charter fixing

the terms and conditions of authority and the limits of obedience. She does not vow "obedience according to the rule." Her husband may be gentle and agreeable, may be kind and affectionate, may be sober and reasonable, or he may turn out in the end to be uncertain of temper, exacting, neglectful of home, dissolute, capricious or cruel. But however the authority and the obedience may ultimately shape themselves, this is certain, that it is not the nun's profession but marriage which mankind has agreed to call a lottery.

The sketch I have given of the constitutional liberties of convents would be incomplete if I did not add a word upon the subject of their canonical visitation. This duty falls upon the Bishop, and it takes place in practice about once in two years, although the law makes it annual. At the visitation each sister in a private interview states to the Visitor all whatever she has observed that may be in excess or defect, or in any manner a deviation from the rule, whether in superiors or in subjects, in administration or in conduct. Rare, indeed, is it to have any grave matter to investigate on these occasions, but nevertheless it is a time when a whole community revises its state and position, and when even minor deficiencies are brought to the bar of judgment and of correction. The whole establishment is examined, the accounts are audited, and whatever has to be set in order is brought before the entire community in Chapter assembled. Besides the periodical visitation, the community, or a certain number of its members, can at any time call for a visitation on shewing reasonable cause for such a step. The visitation is conservative in more than one direction; if it keeps every one to the rule it prevents any autho-

urity from exceeding the rule; whilst it gives the due support to conventual government, it gives to all who are subject to it, an opportunity of private representation for the purpose of bringing about the rectification of any deviation from the law of the Rule.

In this Lecture I have exhibited the constitutional character of conventual government. I have entered into some details for the purpose of making this constitutional government more intelligible. I have likewise shewn you with how much caution the Church sets its conditions and limits to a nun's obligations of obedience, and I might have added the important observation that the Rule, or some constitutional declaration upon the Rule, lays down the maxim, that nothing prescribed by the Rule, unless on the ground of some other law, such as the divine law, is binding under sin. It is a fault, an imperfection, an offence against order and rule, a something to be corrected, but it is not a crime. I have also shewn you something of that great care and almost incredible precaution which guards against the possibility of binding a nun to her state of life before she thoroughly knows what she is doing, and how far she is competent for the life in which she engages. And here again I might have added that it is of the very gravest concern to a community, that every means should be taken to prevent the possibility of its becoming engaged for life to one who has not its spirit, and cannot concur in promoting the general sense of happiness. And hence in voting for a new member, it is a maxim, in the case of doubt, to vote against the person. Not only because there ought to be certainty in a decision of such importance, but

also because doubt implies either the defect of evidence even regarding one with whom you live, or an adverse reason which you cannot analyse.

In my next and last Lecture, I propose to treat of the personal liberty of the nun, and upon the works of conventual life.

LECTURE THIRD.

THE WORK OF CONVENTUAL LIFE.

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MY BRETHREN,—A great founder of the Religious life, St. Columbanus, has said that “He who takes away your freedom takes away your dignity.” A more recent founder of a Religious Order has left it as a precept to his spiritual children that “they should do all their actions in the spirit of intelligence and freedom.” Freedom is no stranger to convents. A nun is not a slave, nor is her obedience an act of slavery; on the contrary, it is intelligent, dignified, and free. I have shown in my last lecture that nuns have their obedience measured by a definite rule, that that rule is drawn from the Holy Scriptures, that their government is constitutional, that a nun binds herself to no obligation with which she is not thoroughly conversant beforehand, and that her superior, whilst representing the principle of authority, is but the obedient subject of the rule in whatever she commands. It remains for me to explain to you that freedom of spirit which is the personal attribute of every true nun, and which is one of the finest features of her character. In undertaking this task, however, I feel myself opposed by two difficulties. My first difficulty lies in the utter inexperience on the part of many of my audience of any such life as I am contemplating, and in the strong prejudice which induces them to fancy it impossible for a nun to have freedom of



any kind. My second difficulty is owing to the contracted views which so many of our countrymen entertain as to the nature of freedom, and more especially of the freedom of the soul.

Freedom may be considered under two aspects, it has its positive and its negative side. Negative freedom is but the removal of obstacles to the exercise of positive freedom; whilst positive freedom consists in the capacity, habit or act of exercising and putting out those free powers and faculties of our soul of which we hold the independent possession. The English mind, however, is conversant with public more than with personal liberty; it runs upon the notions of political, social, commercial, and religious freedom, and mainly as it concerns their unfettered action in their several spheres through the absence or removal of restrictive laws. Again there is the scientific question, and following on that again the theological question, which are among the coldest and hardest favoured questions that ever were raised, as to whether the will is ever free at all in its acts, or is always under necessity; questions that could never enter into the mind of a nun, because living as she does in the warm and free atmosphere of that liberty which belongs to the children of God, anything so freezing as a question about the possibility of her liberty could not come near her mind. Freedom is not to be found in any outward dispositions or conditions whatever, it is an inward power, a spontaneous motion, a great moral quality, a vital force originating action from within us, the source and first principle of all responsibility, acting in the light of intelligence, from a motive of good, and for a worthy end. This at all events is the ideal of perfect liberty; by it we control ourselves, and hold ourselves back

from the insinuations of error and the assaults of passion; with it we ascend above ourselves into the expansive regions of truth, of order, and of goodness.

To be able to run into error, to sink into weakness, or to commit sin, are not among the indispensable conditions of freedom, or else God would not be the freest of all beings. A truthless, lawless, godless life is not freedom; it is the very reverse of freedom, for here the will blindly puts itself into bondage. How then shall we define freedom? Cicero tells us that liberty consists in being the servant of law. And this heathen philosopher only anticipates the doctrine of St. Paul, who expresses the same idea in these forcible words:—"Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves as servants to obey, ye are servants of him whom ye obey, whether it be of sin unto death, or of obedience unto justice. But thanks to God that ye were servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart, unto that form of doctrine in which ye have been instructed. Being then freed from sin, ye became servants of justice." Here the Apostle would have us to comprehend that it is through our becoming the hearty and obedient servants of justice, in other words, of truth and law, that we are set free from the slavery of sin. In like manner St. Paul tells the Corinthians that the slave is made free in Christ, and that the free-man is the servant of Christ. To be free then is to be the servant of truth, to be the subject of law, to obey the voice of justice. As Balmez observes, "Liberty of mind consists in being the servant of truth, and liberty of will in being the servant of virtue; if you change this, you destroy liberty. Take away law and you admit force; take away truth and you admit error; take away virtue and

you admit vice." Freedom then makes us free by making us obedient to truth, to law, or to virtue. And it follows that the most perfect freedom is that which lights us on through the highest truth to obey the highest law for the noblest end. In other words, that soul is the freest which is the most perfectly obedient to the word and wisdom of God from the motive of the perfect love of God. This at once transfers the soul into a vast region of beauty, light, and truth, where she ranges free and unconfined. The great patriarch of Religious Orders, St. Benedict, found that when we are subject to the Creator every creature becomes small and poor, so much so that in one of his visions of the Divine truth, the globe of this earth seemed to his mind but as a speck amidst the rays of its eternal light.

But the soul's freedom has another office nearer home, and that lies in resisting its adversaries, of which the chief are our inferior appetites, our blinding passions, and distracting tempers—above all, our pride, egotism, and selfishness. Control over self, with resistance to these adversaries—in other words, the exercise of self-humiliation and the practice of self-denial are amongst the most genuine acts of freedom, and amongst the most efficacious means for reaching greater freedom of soul. Freedom of soul as a habit is won through the way of the voluntary cross.

There are no chains so heavy as those which bind us down to low levels of thought; no nets so confining as the fashions and frivolities of this world; no fetters so cramping as grovelling desires, no persecutions so ingenious in their torments as our own ambitions, rivalries, and jealousies. Habit may make them sit on us like nature; not our own mother nature, indeed, but a hard step-

dame nature; and only those who have first been under, and then set free from her trammels, can comprehend their oppressiveness. A celebrated nun, St. Catherine of Genoa, in a famous dialogue which she wrote, represents the body and soul as making an agreement that each shall let the other have its own way in turn, week and week about, and that without let or hindrance from the other, subject however to this condition, that neither shall lead the other to sin. And to prevent all differences, as the mutual friend of both parties, self-love is chosen to act as umpire to settle all disputes that may arise on the spot. So the soul, having precedence of the body, has her week first, and takes a flight into the higher regions of contemplation and eternal love, leaving the poor body sadly pinched and pined. But when the body's turn comes round, the soul gets into incomparably greater difficulties, for, contrary to her very nature, she is dragged into darkness, immersed in trouble, and straightened in circumstances, chained in every faculty, degraded in every sentiment, whilst the body goes on with eager appetite to the satiating of its every desire. In vain does the soul appeal to self-love; self-love maintains that the body is in its rights, and both body and self-love combine in complaining of the soul as ambitious to get freer of the body than was ever intended by nature. It becomes plain that self-love was in league with the body from the first, and uniting their wanton strength together they drag the poor soul into slavery beneath them; nor is that all, for against the bargain they drag her into sin. She has nothing left her in her misery and anguish, but, so soon as she gets her turn, to rise in determination, to appeal to our Lord for rescue and for

mercy, and breaking the unjust contract, to resolve never for the rest of her life to give the body an inch of license, however self-love may clamour, knowing well by experience that if the body gets an inch of license it will take an ell, and will leave the soul divested of that freedom with which Christ makes us free. If in this allegory, my brethren, you recognise the triumphs of freedom, you must equally recognise the triumphs of the cloister.

Our Lord has said, "If you know the truth, the truth will make you free." He is Himself the liberating truth. Again He says:—"If the Son make you free, then are you free indeed." These are no figures of speech, they express great and practical facts. When St. Paul looks down upon the appetites warring in his members against the law of his mind, he calls them the body of death, and cries out for a deliverer, and he finds that deliverer in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." From what does that grace deliver us? From ourselves, from our own spirit as opposed to the spirit of God. But "where is the spirit of God, there is liberty." Deeper than all other obstacles to this liberating spirit works within us that pride of life, that rooted, all absorbing egotism, which nothing will loosen save our subjecting ourselves from our very centre to God, and the surrendering ourselves to a law of obedience, of which the Divine will is both the informing principle and the final motive. This is what St. Paul calls the being "delivered unto the perfect law of liberty."

It follows from all we have said that liberty is inseparable from law, and freedom from truth, and that the link which unites them in the human soul is the ready obedience and voluntary submission of that soul to whatever the wisdom of God pre-

scribes and regulates for the perfecting of our spiritual nature. And it no less follows that the most perfect obedience rendered to the highest law of Christian perfection, to that law which gives us command both of ourselves and of the special favour of God, is the straight and sure way of liberty. The habit of obeying intelligently, heartily, and of good conscience, is of all ways the most efficacious for developing the energetic power of the will, in making it ever prompt and answerable to our call. And a vigorous and responsive will makes a cheerful and happy spirit. It is this habit of obedience which forms the free and energetic character of the seaman; while maintained in the face of peril, it gives dignity to the soldier; men grow into heroes by sacrificing themselves in obedience to a principle. Without obedience to something higher than ourselves, nothing is ennobled in this world. The artist is free of his art by subjecting himself to its laws; the man of science by humbling his intelligence to the conditions of his science; the inventor succeeds by tying himself down to the facts by which his conjectures are brought to the test. The nun has set herself to gain the art and science of spiritual perfection, of forming her soul upon the model of our Blessed Lord, and the more completely she obeys the law of His example the more free she will be in her own soul, the more free also in Him whose life and example she is following. Obedience is not forced, but given willingly; and, as it was said by an Abbot of the eighth century, "Freedom is not given up because humility freely bows its head."

But there is another condition that is a most important aid to the force of freedom, and without which the strongest will is weakened and wasted, and that is the limitation of its sphere of activity.

The created will must have a line and a limit ; without that it is uncertain and bewildered, or, at all events, its powers are enfeebled and divided. It is by force of the limitation and concentration of light that the telescope gains its power of searching the distant heavens. It is by limit and concentration that steam puts forth its irresistible strength. Bossuet gives us another illustration. He compares the free force of the human soul to a river. If left to wander at its own unlimited will, it will overflow a country, and become a shallow, stagnant, pestilential marsh ; but let it have banks for its limitation on this side and on that, and it becomes that clear, deep, energetic stream of waters flowing on with irresistible freedom until it rejoins its parent ocean. So is it with the mind, so with the will ; they are free in their labours and strong in their freedom, and they make us strong and free in proportion to the judiciousness of the limitations which we set round their exercise. And this is precisely what is done in the Religious life. The Rule and the authority of superiors mark out the sphere of each one's duty and activity ; and the subject fills up that sphere of duty traced by the voice of authority with her own intelligence and judgment. One nun is appointed to sing the antiphons in choir ; another is set to teach a class in the pension school ; a third is sent out to visit the sick poor ; a fourth has the charge of patients in the hospital ; a fifth is seated down to the embroidery of a vestment ; a seventh is directed to teach a music lesson ; an eighth is appointed to keep the sacristy in order ; a ninth to superintend the domestic department ; a tenth to look after the garden : each one is set to a sphere to which her powers are adapted, and this she fills up to the best of her

judgment and ability. Authority draws out the lines of duty for obedience to accomplish, and freedom fills them up. This gives that vigour to the character of well-trained nuns which led Count Montalembert to say that "strength, veiled by gentleness, is the breath of their life."

And here we must again turn to the character and example of our Blessed Lord, who is the perfect model of this way of life. From His birth in the manger to His death on the Cross, His life was one unbroken act of obedience, and of obedience under vow. He "offered Himself once for all," and "was offered because He willed it," and the words of that vow by which He offered Himself St. Paul has put on record. He says: "Coming into the world, He saith: Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldst not have, but thou hast fitted to me a body. Holocausts for sin did not please thee. Then I said: Behold I come: at the head of the book it is written of me, to do thy will, O God. . . . Then I said: Behold I come, to do thy will, O God." Entering into the world He vowed that obedience which He consummated on the Cross. From His twelfth to His thirtieth year the record of His life is summed up in these words: "And He went down with them (Mary and Joseph) and came to Nazareth: and He was subject to them." After He had passed from the condition of a working man to fulfil His mission to the world, He said: "I came not to do my own will, but the will of Him that sent me." And to show that His Father's will was the Rule which He obeyed, He also said: "I do nothing of myself. What I see my Father doing, that do I." And so "He was made obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God hath exalted Him, and given Him a Name which is above



all names." Yet this obedience, this oblation of obedience, was the fruit of the most perfect freedom. He freely offered Himself, He held free command over the inferior passions and sorrows of His Human nature. In the midst of that nature's agony He exclaimed: "Not my will but thine be done." He was even "free amongst the dead." There is nothing left after this but to accept the truth, that obedience to the Holy will of God is the perfecting of humanity, even the perfecting of human freedom. The very reward of our Lord's humble, chaste, and self-denied life on earth, the exaltation of His humanity to the right hand of God, His power also over the world, is ascribed to His obedience.

From beginning to end, and from superiors to subjects, the work of conventual life is the work of obedience to the will of God. In the words of the Rule, in the customs of the community, in the ordering of the day, in the sound of the bell, in the voice of superiors, in the ordinations of Providence, bring they toil or rest, consolation or suffering, at all times, in all things, the nun sees, the nun hears, the nun loves to accept and obey the Holy Will of God. Everywhere the Will of God meets her, everywhere she meets the Will of God, always with this sense of Christ within her heart: "I came not to do my own will, but the will of God who sent me." It is this which makes her life so unselfish, and, therefore, easy, sweet, and vigorous."

The privacy and seclusion of the domestic circle loosens the mind from its trammels of caution, and sets free the heart to flow at its sweet will. Whoever is free of the family has but to enter within its precincts to find himself disencumbered of that fatiguing self-guardedness and that sense

of human respect which, like an over-tight garment or a coat of chain armour, clasps every one round in one or another shape as he walks through the world, let him affect freedom and independence as much as he choose. God has placed no creature of a high temperament in an atmosphere much lower than its own, without providing it with an ample defence. The albatross is protected by its wealth of feathers, and the ermine by its beautiful fur. The tone and constitutional temperament of those who are consecrated to God is much higher than that which is prevalent in the world, and hence the need of some providential protection for the one against the other. But why should the world be angry at the isolation of that which belongs not to it? Why should the world refuse to tolerate the little spot here and there that He who created the earth may keep, and within the limits of which all may be devoted to Him? In its proudly insisting that all should have their rights, why will the world yield no exclusive rights to God, or to God's servants? The real object contemplated in the walls that protect a convent is not to imprison the nuns, but to shut out the world. There is nothing so easy as to get into a prison, yet nothing so difficult as to get out of it again. In a convent, on the contrary, it is so very difficult to find a way inside, but so very easy for anyone who is inside to find the way out. And the reason of this is, that everything is regulated with a view to exclude the world, but not with a view to imprison the nun. When the good people of the outside world give vent to their compassion for the poor imprisoned nuns, they little think of the playful, gentle humour with which that compassion is reciprocated. Nuns look upon the world as the

daughters of Noah may be supposed to have looked upon the feasters and dancers from the window of the ark; in no self-righteous scorn or puritanical spirit of self-congratulation; far from their hearts are such sour, sectarian sentiments as these; but yet they cannot help being conscious of the contrast presented between their state of security and the perils to which those souls are exposed that live in a world which they vowed in their baptism to renounce and put aside. If you grant the existence of a convent and that ideal of it which I am drawing, you must perforce allow that it could not survive the intrusion of the world's spirit within its precincts, and that by such an intrusion its life and freedom would be extinguished together. And so, in no unkindness to the world or to its children, with many prayers for its amelioration, bidding it farewell with gratitude for the good and pardon for the evil it may have done them, with great good humour the nuns draw a wall round the world and put it in prison, thanking God for the little plot of earth where they are left free and in peace, there to live under a holier law, there from that resting point to contemplate and move the heavens.

I believe the nuns will allow that I have fairly spoken their sentiments. You may point to all that they have left beyond those walls, and they will point to all that they have found within them. They will ask you to notice that though they have shut out the world, they have not shut out the heavens; and that amongst the hundred-fold reward that our Lord has promised to those who leave all things for his sake, is included a hundred-fold freedom of mind and heart, and a hundred-fold society in the sisterhood. You may say that you cannot understand this; and they

will reply that they perfectly know that you cannot understand it, that spiritual things are, as the Apostle tells us, to be spiritually criticised, and that they themselves had very incompletely understood it until their life became a part of it.

Convents are divisible into two classes, those of the contemplative and those of the active Orders. The chief object of the contemplative Order is prayer, whilst the object of the active Orders is to combine prayer with works of charity and benevolence. Some Protestants are disposed to accept the active Orders as worthy their commendation, whilst they reserve their reprobation for the contemplative Orders. But this is narrow, illiberal, and in direct opposition to the spirit of freedom. Such persons do not give themselves the trouble to understand that all spirits and all attractions are not the same, and that every spirit must praise God after its own way. The votaries of art and of practical life would find themselves badly off without the votaries of science. One contemplates the heavens that another may cross the seas with safety. The maxims and the rules which sustain the spirit of the Sister of Charity are drawn from the great lights of the contemplative orders. The hosts of Israel headed by the valiant Josue confronted the enemy in fight upon the plain, but it was Moses lifting his hands to heaven on the mountain top who gained the victory. If it be a great mercy to help the world in its distresses by our labours, it is as great a mercy to move the powers of heaven to succour the same world. And for that end the prayer of the just availeth much as the Scripture tells us. Is it nothing in a world where God is neglected as in ours, that amongst the divisions of labour, there should be a class who neglect the world, in order

to supply more perfectly for the world's neglect of God? Lord Byron was deeply touched when he found that a lady he had never seen, and who had never seen him, had said a prayer every day of her life that God would give all needful graces to his soul. And can my countrymen entertain other than grateful feelings when they know, that there are communities of nuns in England who for centuries have included it in their vow, to devote their whole lives of prayer and self-denial to God with the express intention of obtaining God's mercy and grace for England. For ages they kept that vow in the foreign lands into which they were driven, and they keep it to this day. To their love of God they have ever joined the love of England. This prayer for England is never interrupted, for succeeding one another day and night they keep up their prayer for ever.

Of the convents situated in this county, there is one whose members, forty in number, passed in a body through France amidst the horrors of the first revolution. They landed at Brighton with nothing in the world except one half franc, and being French they were thrown amongst utter strangers. George IV., then Prince Regent, called upon them. They asked his leave to cross the country to embark again for Belgium. He told them that Belgium was in as great trouble as France, but that if they would stop in England they should be protected. He even paid their hotel bills, after their arrival in London, until they succeeded in finding friends. This large community still keeps up that high discipline now that its members are English and Irish for which it was celebrated for two hundred years in France. It teaches a school of fifty ladies. Of the two hundred and twenty-seven convents, including a

number of small branch houses, now in Great Britain, two hundred belong to active Orders. And of the contemplative Orders the great majority are engaged in teaching boarding schools. Of the twenty-nine convents belonging to my jurisdiction, for example, there are only two which are not engaged in the office of teaching, and these keep up perpetual prayer.

It is the vast amount of ignorance, misery and want that infest the lower states of modern societies, and especially of those places where wealth abounds, that has moved God in his mercy to move woman in her pity to devote herself to the healing of these miseries. But in no way does she accomplish this task more effectively than by removing the disgrace and dishonour which the modern, like the pagan world, attaches to poverty and to the miseries resulting from poverty. Virgil reflected the pagan world in calling poverty a turpitude, and the modern world look upon it as ignominious if not criminal. When, however, the poor see ladies descending from splendour, from affluence, from comfort, or from sufficiency, to adopt a life of poverty for Christ's sake and for theirs, they begin to look upon their state with other eyes, and Lady poverty herself becomes their consoling angel. From infancy to decrepid years, every human misery, suffering and want has given rise to some Religious Order for its alleviation. They have established the *crèche* or institute of cradles for taking care of babies whilst their mothers are at work. They have established foundling hospitals to save infants from murder. In China, where the pressure of population leads to many children being exposed on the highway to be devoured by dogs or swine, they have asylums into which those that are abandoned are

gathered, baptized, and brought up. They have founded orphanages for both sexes; they teach infant schools, poor schools, and night schools for adults. There are nuns for teaching the ignorant and preparing them for the sacraments; institutions for receiving servants with good characters out of place; and others for reforming women who have lost their honour. There are nuns who manage general hospitals, nuns who manage private hospitals of their own, nuns who devote themselves to incurable patients, and nuns who take the aged and neglected of both sexes to their convents and find them a home for life. There are nuns who visit the sick poor, and nuns who stay in private houses to nurse the sick; and even the contemplative Orders have almonries at which to feed the destitute, and give medicines to the sick. When modern armies are in the field the Sisters of Charity are at hand to bind up the soldier's wounds; and when he is stricken down with fever, they watch over him and soothe his shattered brain. What makes them secure amidst the licence and profanity with which they come in contact? Their sacred character, their vow, and the prayer and contemplation which precedes their active work; again, the very spectacle of that vice and misery which the world creates but cannot take away. St. Vincent of Paul said in founding the Sisters of Charity that their parish Church should be their Cloister, and their modesty their veil.

One of the most beautiful attributes of the nun is her maternal character;—wherever a mother is wanted by distressed and bereaved humanity, there she steps in as a mother sent from God. Childhood, youth, maturity, and age, all find a mother in their hour of need in her. She who has given

up the function of natural motherhood has her hundred-fold in the function of spiritual motherhood; without children of her own on earth, she claims many children of her own in the kingdom of heaven. St. Augustin teaches us this great truth by means of the following illustration. Suppose, he says, a lady were to devote her fortune and her life to the buying of pagan slaves, and bringing them up as Christians;—in the kingdom of heaven will she not be the true mother of those children? The very presence of those virgins consecrated to Christ breathes a purity, inspires a modesty, and impresses the mind of their sex with a sense of the sanctity of this virtue, which exercises a great influence upon the general purity of woman; and in contemplating their spiritual maternity, and their holy influence upon the matronage of the world, we may well see in them the singular realization of the prophecy of Isaias;—"Rejoice, O thou barren who bearest not; sing forth praise, and make a joyful noise, thou that didst not travail with child: for many more are the children of the desolate, than of her that hath a husband, saith the Lord."

Never was the conventual life put to such a test of its virtues as in the great French Revolution, and never was there an issue more triumphant. The disciples of Voltaire and of Robespierre had proclaimed that nothing was required except to open the convents, and proclaim the abandonment of vows to be legal, in order to prove to the world that the nuns were the victims of an unnatural system. Well, in the year 1791, the infidels made their experiment. Every convent in France was thrown open, but instead of leaving their convents the nuns were driven out of them. Hundreds of them, even whole communities together perished



on the scaffold, and although the rest found their friends most of them slain, exiled, or lost sight of, and themselves without a home, how many of them married? Not one in a thousand. So soon as convents were again tolerated most of the survivors found their way back to community life, and now after all the light poured upon France by that Revolution, what is the state of conventual life in France? In that kingdom there are at this moment a hundred and twenty thousand nuns.

The occupations that fill up the day in a community of Religious women are of two kinds: first, there are the various religious exercises, consisting of the recitation of the Divine Office in choir, meditation, and spiritual reading; and there are the active duties, either of charity or of necessary household cares. The larger portion of time given in all communities to prayer falls in the early morning hours, and towards the latter part of the day, leaving a considerable portion of the day free for work. Even in enclosed orders which do not devote themselves to teaching, or the care of the poor, active occupations of one sort or another fall to the share of each member of the community. A large convent makes a great deal of work in itself, independently of the institutions that may be attached to it. As it is the aim of Religious women to have as little intercourse with the world as possible, they endeavour to supply as many of their wants as they can by means of their own labour, and thus a great variety of employments is undertaken by them, which not only affords a useful occupation of time but is also a source of interest and recreation, and often calls forth abilities that would have lain dormant in the world.

I have often found Protestant ladies in a state

of perplexity to understand how nuns filled up their time. They have asked me questions like these—of course they take in the chief periodicals? Do they not read our entertaining literature very much? Don't they play a great deal at cards? Tell these ladies how wide their conjectures are of the mark and their perplexities redouble. Tell a community at their recreation about these conjectures respecting their occupations, and they reply with a burst of merriment. The fact is that the whole day in a convent is so filled up with occupations, and those occupations are discharged with a method and regularity so complete, that everything from morning to night moves with the accuracy and punctuality of a clock. You could not interrupt the regulation of time for five minutes without deranging the machinery for a whole day. Those who have opportunities of judging are aware how frequently it happens, that those who in the world have been considered of delicate constitutions regain health and spirits in Religion, mainly from their early hours, regularity of life, and the alternation of well adjusted occupation for mind and body. Homely duties carry a certain charm with them, and form in themselves a recreation. The want of such duties, which a generation ago were discharged in every English household, is felt and acknowledged by most women in our day. That listless and objectless life led by many in the world is an utter stranger amongst nuns; they never suffer from that weary do nothing complaint which led a young lady to exclaim, that she would give anything if mamma would only let her sweep the stairs sometimes. One who had been an indulged member of a family, where she was considered as a sort of invalid, laid down her broom after a vigorous

sweep, and said—"What a comfort it is that we do these things! At home I should have been lying on a sofa, or reading a novel!"

But charitable and domestic duties do not furnish the only occupations pursued in a convent. Religious discipline does not exclude the culture of the mind or taste. Indeed, occupations of what may be called an intellectual character spring out of some of the peculiar duties of Religious women. Those who are employed in the labours of the school for instance have to perfect themselves in many studies, and perhaps to train the younger members of their own community so as to fit them for similar offices. The singing of the Divine office necessitates the cultivation of musical skill; the supply of Church vestments requires the exercise of artistic taste. In the work room, or common room, all who are not otherwise engaged, meet at certain hours of the morning and afternoon, and employ themselves in manual work, writing or drawing. Needlework, which may justly be considered a woman's art, is probably nowhere carried to such perfection as within the walls of a convent. Not to speak of the very large amount of useful work which has necessarily to be executed in a house wherein clothing has to be furnished both to the community and to the various objects of their charity, the making of Church vestments and ornaments forms in many convents a distinct occupation, which requires a high degree of taste and artistic skill. If the visitor were to enter such a work room he would probably be struck not only with the beauty, but also with the magnitude of the work undertaken. A certain portion of every day being regularly devoted to them with rare interruption, enables Religious women to execute works which if exhibited to the public eye would

certainly create astonishment. While some execute these works with the needle, others prepare them with the pencil, and by this division of labour a great number of hands and a great variety of talent are often engaged on a single piece.

The prevailing spirit of a community thus variously employed is undoubtedly one of cheerfulness. This spirit is cherished by many provisions of the Rule, particularly that which alternates the different exercises of prayer, work, and recreation in judicious proportions. The time table may differ in different convents, but in all the principle is established of making work succeed to prayer, and recreation to work. In this way duties which if prolonged might become irksome become actually recreation. The long attendance in choir which no doubt appears excessive to some critics, occupying in some communities five, in others six, and in others even eight hours a day, is felt to be a source of delight to those who find in it their spiritual refreshment, and who come to it from active labours. Manual labour often interferes to prevent the head from being weakened and exhausted with mental labour. The necessity imposed by Religious rule of breaking off any occupation at appointed signals and exchanging it for the particular community exercise which has next to be fulfilled, proves by experience to be one of the greatest safeguards of health and cheerfulness.

It is also proper to observe that in every Religious community certain hours are set apart, generally twice in the day, for all the members to assemble for recreation in common. At these times Religious women are accustomed to entertain themselves and one another, either in or out of doors, as other intelligent women may be supposed to do, that is to say, by conversation, read-

ing aloud, or the like. In the history of St. Jane Francis Chantal many charming notices are to be found of the recreation of the nuns of the Visitation order, in which we see the pleasant gaiety, tempered always by a religious spirit, which prevailed among them; and in which some who had formerly figured as great ladies in the world, employed their talents in composing spiritual songs which they and their sisters sang at such times, or in other innocent and suitable diversions. St. Jane Chantal had a beautiful voice, and often sang at recreation; if any idea or sentiment which she read pleased her, she made one of her Religious turn it into verse, and bring it as her contribution to the amusement of the community. There can certainly be no idea more at variance with the truth than the common English prejudice which represents a convent as the abode of melancholy. Such a prejudice would be dissipated by the first contact with the reality. English persons draw their ideas on such subjects from romances. Their idea of a convent is one of picturesque gloom; they have no idea that through the entire day it is the scene of tranquil cheerful labour. They picture to themselves nuns as pacing up and down in the dim religious light of a Gothic cloister, and can hardly believe that the phantoms of their imagination are all the time busily employed in the very same practical duties which engage the rest of mortals, still less can they be persuaded that the atmosphere of these religious houses does not quench gaiety, or cramp the understanding. As the general public cannot penetrate within the seclusion of a convent to correct their judgment on this point it may not be out of place to direct their attention to some genuine authentic sources of information, and none seem more likely to give

us a just idea of a nun's turn of mind than her correspondence. If the correspondence of a nun were advertised for publication in one of our newspapers, it would certainly attract some curiosity. What if we were to dip into such a correspondence and find, besides a vast number of letters on spiritual subjects, and others on temporal affairs, written with singular shrewdness and sagacity, others again full of all the playful wit and lively intelligence that could charm a polished circle? A nun, the foundress of several convents, finds time to unbend her mind in the midst of heavy cares by writing to her brother. She sends him some verses of her own composition. "I have written them," she says, "to amuse the sisters at recreation. They have neither head nor feet, but we contrive to sing them. I do not remember the rest that I wrote. Fine brains, you will say, for a foundress." Again, writing to the same brother, she sends him a little spiritual maxim, and asks him to explain it. He shows it to three of his friends, and the four write their explanations and send them to the nun for her to act as umpire, and decide which is the best. In her reply, she rallies them all with a graceful pleasantry, which if found in the pages of Mm. de Sevigné would be quoted as a model of feminine wit and elegance. Yet all this is from the pen of a bare-footed Carmelite, and is to be found in the letters of St. Teresa.

St. Teresa's genius was of an exceptional order, but this sunniness of heart that she preserved in the midst of the gravest cares appears in the correspondence and biographies of other Religious women. Take up the life of the Foundress of the Order of Mercy, whose death took place not thirty years ago. In one page you will find some im-

promptu verses written at recreation, in another a letter in rhyme written in reply to one received from a young novice whom she was used to call "her little sister poet." "In the midst of all her trials and difficulties," we read, "she found time to write letters to those who were absent, not only of advice and instruction, but even of amusement." And elsewhere you will find her ingenious ways of turning even troubles into sources of gaiety, such as when she makes matter of merriment out of a broken arm, in order not to distress her Religious sisters. One of her maxims was that a Superior should know how sometimes to say a serious thing playfully.

Here is a day in a Birmingham convent of Sisters of Mercy. Winter and summer they rise at five o'clock to the minute. The bell rings, and all assemble in the choir of the chapel. The Divine Office begins, and the psalmody is recited by alternate choirs, the lessons drawn from Scripture are read from the lectern, the prayers recited by the sister who presides. About an hour has passed, when suddenly the chorus of voices has ceased. A sister from her place reads the three points of a meditation on some religious mystery, on a passage in our Lord's life or Passion, or on some virtue enforced by a saying of Christ, or a parable, or a sentence of St. Paul. Then there is deep silence for half an hour, each sister ruminating in her mind, or musing in her heart upon the subject that has been read. As her mind lightens, as her heart warms with the inward exercise, she ascends to God in secret recollection, makes some search of her own heart, and as the time draws to a conclusion, she gathers a spiritual flower from the garden of her reflections to carry in her recollection all the day. The sign is given,

all rise, the psalmody recommences in the offices of Prime and Tierce. Then the priest enters the sanctuary, seculars coming for an early mass enter the church, and all assist at the Holy Sacrifice. At the due time, they advance to the threshold of the sanctuary and receive the Holy Communion. After their thanksgiving, the Offices of Sext and None are recited, and then the members of the community silently disperse to their several domestic duties. Breakfast comes at eight, after which half-an-hour is devoted to spiritual books. At nine all the sisters are in their several duties and offices—some in a boarding school of sixty girls, some in a poor school of three hundred girls, some looking after the sufferers in a small private hospital, some in the different domestic offices of the household, in the kitchen, bakery, laundry, habit-room or work-room, or at the accounts. The superioress is writing letters, receiving visitors, giving directions, answering questions, doing two or three things at once; for the quantity of affairs that require attention in a large convent, with many avocations, if not attended to as they arise, become overwhelming from their multiplicity and weight. The mere provisioning of an establishment in which, besides the nuns, there are considerable institutions of charity or large schools, extends to the feeding and clothing of from a hundred to two hundred persons, and this is independent of the almonry at which the poor are fed and clothed. I have known contemplative convents give from sixty to eighty meals a day to distressed people in severe winter.

Some thirty years ago a contemplative convent were compelled to leave a town in the West of



England because the inhabitants refused to turn an unhealthy stream; but no sooner had they gone than the poor-rates began to be much more serious. The town then sent a deputation to the nuns, promising that if they would come back they would not only turn the stream, but would have a public day of rejoicing. Wisdom, however, came too late: the nuns had made a judicious change. In another instance, during the severe frost of the winter before last, about fifty people, men, women, and children, belonging to canal boats, were frozen up for some time near a convent. They gave the poor creatures a room, made them a fire, and gave them two good meals a day. It was literally the first contact of many of them with Christianity. Most of the younger ones had never heard of Christ, and knew not a prayer. They received the first principles of instruction with great gratitude, and the poor things were deeply touched with finding such an unexpected blessing. It appears to be a fact that there was not a single mother in that group who had not lost a child at the locks, slipping into the basins when engaged in opening them on dark and wet nights, and some had lost more than one child in this manner.

By 12 o'clock the community is again gathered in the chapel, at this time for a few minutes of recollection and self-examination, purifying the heart before God after the morning's labours. Then to dinner. Each meal is taken in silence, at which the Scriptures are first read, and then some instructive book. After dinner all go in procession to the chapel for thanksgiving; then comes the hour of recreation, when the floodgates of speech are let loose, and the cheerfulness and

good humour is the more perfect from the purity of conscience from which it emanates, and the labour, prayer, and silence that went before. Depend upon it, you never get a very solid mind that has not been a good deal disciplined by judicious silence. In the afternoon work is resumed, and some of the sisters are gone on their errand of mercy to the houses of the sick and poor. At five all again assemble in choir for the recitation of vespers; after that each has her time for private reading, writing, or some other pursuit. At seven comes supper, and then the chief recreation of the day, for in the after-dinner recreation many of the sisters must be occupied in indispensable duties; but now all are assembled, and for an hour and a quarter amusement is the order of the day. One feature there is in the recreation hours of Religious women that is altogether their own, you never see their fingers idle, whether in a circle round the room, or in groups, every one is sewing or knitting, or at some industry which stops not the flow of conversation. It is only on the Sunday that their hands ever desist from work. "Let the devil never find you idle," is a good old conventual maxim. After recreation come the last duties in chapel, which done, each one retires to her room and to her rest.

I have no space left for describing the other three convents in Birmingham, or their various charitable institutions; but these things are no mysteries. The convents are more completely before the public than almost any other charitable institutions in this large town. For example, the convent in Hunter's Lane, which is the most complete we have in Birmingham, has been open to all respectable persons, both Protestant and

Catholic, who present themselves with introductions, ever since its foundation, six-and-twenty years ago. Thursday has always been a day appointed as the most convenient for that purpose. I may say the same of the convent in Lowe Street, Camp Hill, and of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who are always ready in seasonable hours to receive those who desire to look over their institutions, and are properly introduced.

I will conclude these lectures with the well-weighed words in which Count Montalembert has portrayed the character of our ancient English nuns, and which he finds existing in its completeness in the Religious women of the present day. "In all these noble maidens, betrothed to God," he says, "there appears a sort of courage and strength above their sex. It is the special attribute of monastic life to transfigure human nature, by giving the soul that which is almost always wanting to it in ordinary existence. It inspires the young virgin with an element of manfulness which withdraws her from the weaknesses of nature, and makes her at the necessary moment a heroine; but a soft and tender heroine, rising from the depths of humility, obedience, and love, to reach the height of the most generous flights, and to obtain everything that is most powerful and light-giving in human courage. Sometimes it adds, by a supernatural gift, the incomparable charm of childhood, with its artless and endearing candour; and there may be seen upon a living countenance that simplicity in beauty, that serenity in strength, which are the most lovely array of genius and virtue. Thus it happens by times that all that is most grand and pure in the three different types of humanity—the man, the woman, and

the child—is found combined in one single being, which accomplishes all that a soul can do here below to rise from its fall, and render itself worthy of the God who has created and saved it. I speak in the present tense, for all this exists still, and is found and repeated every day in the bosom of our modern civilization.”

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